



speculative fiction **FOR THE REST OF US**

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Angel of Light by Joe Haldeman

"Angel of Light" first appeared in [Cosmos](#), December 2005.

It began innocently enough. Christmastime and no money. I went down into the cellar and searched

deeply for something to give the children. Something they wouldn't have already found during their *hajjes* down there.

On a high shelf, behind bundles of sticks waiting for the cold, I could just see an old wooden chest, pushed far back into a corner. I dropped some of the bundles onto the floor and pushed the others out of the way, and with some difficulty slid the chest to the edge of the shelf. From the thick layer of dust on top, I assumed it was from my father's time or before.

I had a warning thought: Don't open it. Call the authorities.

But just above the lock was engraved the name. John Billings Washington. John Washington was my father's slave name. I think the Billings middle name was his father's. The box probably went back to the twentieth century.

The lock was rusted tight, but the hasp was loose. I got down from the ladder and found a large screwdriver that I could use to pry it.

I slid the chest out and balanced it on my shoulder, and carefully stepped down, the ladder creaking. I set it on the work table and hung one lantern from the rafter over it, and set the other on a stack of scrap wood beside.

The screaming that the screws made, coming out of the hardwood, was so loud that it was almost funny, considering that I supposedly was working in secret. But Miriam was pumping out chords on the organ, singing along with Fatimah, rehearsing for the Christmas service. I could have fired a pistol and no one would have heard it.

The hasp swung free and the top lifted easily, with a sigh of brass. Musty smell and something else. Gun oil. A gray cloth bundle on top was heavy. Of course it held a gun.

It's not unusual to find guns left over from the old times; there were so many. Ammunition was rare, though. This one had two heavy magazines.

I recognized it from news and history pictures, an Uzi, invented and used by the old infidel state Israel. I set it down and wiped my hands.

It would not be a good Christmas present. Perhaps for 'Eid, for Ibriham, when he is old enough to decide whether he is to be called. A Jewish weapon, he would laugh. I could ask the imam whether to cleanse it and how.

There were three cardboard folders under the gun, once held together with rubber bands, which were just sticky lines now. They were full of useless documents about land and banking.

Underneath them, I caught a glimpse of something that looked like pornography. I looked away immediately, closed my eyes, and asked Mohammed and Jesus for strength. Then I took it out and put it in the light.

It was in a plastic bag that had stamped on it "nitrogen seal." What a strange word, a tech word from the old times.

The book inside had the most amazing picture on the front. A man and a woman, both white, embracing. But the woman is terrified. The man seems only resolute, as he fires a strange pistol at a thing like a giant squid, green as a plant. The woman's head is uncovered, and at first she seems naked, but in fact her clothes are simply transparent, like some dancers'. The book is called *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, and is dated Summer 1944. That would be 1365, more than a hundred years before Chrislam.

I leafed through the book, fascinated in spite of its carnal and infidel nature. Most of it seemed to be tales -- not religious parables or folk tales, but lies that were made up at the time, for entertainment. Perhaps there was moral instruction as well. Many of the pictures did show men in situations that were physically or morally dangerous.

The first story, "The Giant Runt," seemed at first sacrilegious; it was about a man furious with God for having created him shorter than normal men. But then a magical machine makes everyone else tiny, and his sudden superiority turns him into a monster. But he sees an opportunity for moral action and redeems himself. The machine is destroyed, the world is normal again, and God rewards him with love.

Nadia, my second wife, came to the door at the top of the stairs and asked whether I needed help with anything. "No," I said. "Don't wait up. I have something to study here. A man thing." I shouldn't have said that. She would be down here after the morning prayer, as soon as I left for work.

I looked at the woman on the cover of the book, so exposed and vulnerable. Perhaps I should destroy it before Nadia or Miriam were exposed to it. A present for Ibriham? No; he would like it, but it would lead him away from proper thought.

I put both lanterns on the table, with the book between them, for maximum light. The paper was brown and the ink, faded. I turned the crumbling pages with care, although I would probably burn the book before dawn. First I would read as much of it as I could. I composed my mind with prayer, reciting the Prophet's *hadith* about the duty of learning.

In 1365 a war was raging all around the world, and various pages took note of this. I think this was only a year or two before America used nuclear weapons the first time, though I found no mention of them. (There were several exhortations to "buy bonds," which at first I misread as bombs. Bonds are financial instruments of some kind.) There were short pieces, evidently presented as truth, about science being used against the enemies of America. The ones that were not presented as true were more interesting, though harder to understand.

Much of the content was religious. "Horatius at the Bridge" was about a madman who could find the "soul" of a bridge and bring it down with the notes from a flute. "Terror in the Dust" and "The Devouring Tide" described scientists who were destroyed because they tried to play God -- the first by giving intelligence to ants and then treating them as if he were an almighty deity, and the second, grandly, by attempting to create a new universe, with himself as Allah. The last short story, "God of Light," had a machine that was obviously Shaytan, trying to tempt the humans into following it into destruction.

The language was crude and at times bizarre, though of course part of that was just a reflection of the technological culture those writers and readers endured together. Life is simpler and more pure now, at least on this side of the city walls. The Kafir may still have books like this.

That gave me an idea. Perhaps this sort of thing would be rare and sought after in their world. I shouldn't accept Kafir money -- though people do, often enough -- but perhaps I could trade it for something more appropriate for a Christmas gift. Barter could be done without an intermediary, too, and frankly I was not eager for my imam to know that I had this questionable book in my possession.

Things are less rigid now, but I sharply remember the day, more than forty years ago, when my father had to burn all of his books. We carried box after box of them to the parking lot in front of the church, where they were drenched with gasoline and set afire. The smell of gasoline, rare now, always brings that back.

He was allowed to keep two books, a New Koran and a New Bible. When a surprise search party later found an old Q'ran in his study, he had to spend a week, naked, in a cage in that same spot -- the jumble of fractured concrete in the middle of the church parking lot -- with nothing but water, except a piece of bread the last day.

(It was an old piece of bread, rock-hard and moldy. I remember how he thanked the imam, carefully brushed off the mold, and managed to stay dignified, gnawing at it with his strong side teeth.)

He told them he kept the old book because of the beauty of the writing, but I knew his feelings went deeper than that: he thought the Q'ran in any language other than Arabic was just a book, not holy. As a boy of five, I was secretly overjoyed that I could stop memorizing the Q'ran in Arabic; it was hard enough in English.

I agree with him now, and ever since it was legal again, I've spent my Sundays trying to cram the Arabic into my gray head. With God's grace I might live long enough to learn it all. Having long ago memorized the English version helps make up for my slow brain.

I put the old book back in its nitrogen seal bag and took it up to bed with me, dropping off a bundle of sticks by the stove on the way. I checked on both children and both wives; all were sleeping soundly. With a prayer of thanks for this strange discovery, I joined Nadia and dreamed of a strange future that had not come to pass.

The next day was market day. I left Nadia with the children and Fatimah and I went down to the medina for the week's supplies.

It really is more a woman's work than a man's, and normally I enjoy watching Fatimah go through the rituals of inspection and barter -- the mock arguments and grudging agreement that comprise the morning's entertainment for customer and merchant alike. But this time I left her in the food part of the medina with the cart, while I went over to the antiques section.

You don't see many Kafir in the produce part of the medina, but there are always plenty wandering through the crafts and antiques section, I suppose looking for curiosities and bargains. Things that are everyday to us are exotic to them, and vice versa.

It was two large tents, connected by a canvas breezeway under which merchants were roasting meats and nuts and selling drinks for dollars or dirhams. I got a small cup of sweet coffee, redolent of honey and cardamom, for two dirhams, and sipped it standing there, enjoying the crowd.

Both tents had similar assortments of useful and worthless things, but one was for dollar transactions and the other was for dirhams and barter. The dollar purchases had to go through an imam, who would extract a fee for handling the money, and pay the merchant what was left, converting into dirham. There were easily three times as many merchants and customers in the dirham-and-barter tent, the Kafir looking for bargains and the sellers for surprises, as much as for doing business. It was festive there, too, a lot of chatter and laughing over the rattle and whine of an amateur band of drummers and fiddlers. People who think we are aloof from infidels, or hate them, should spend an hour here.

Those who did this regularly had tables they rented by the day or month; we amateurs just sat on the ground with our wares on display. I walked around and didn't see anyone I knew, so finally just sat next to a table where a man and a woman were selling books. I laid out a square of newspaper in front of me and set the *Thrilling Wonder Stories* on it.

The woman looked down at it with interest. "What kind of a magazine is that?"

Magazine, I'd forgotten that word. "I don't know. Strange tales, most of them religious."

"It's 'science fiction,'" the man said. "They used to do that, predict what the future would be like."

"Used to? We still do that."

He shrugged. "Not that way. Not as fiction."

"I wouldn't let a child see that," the woman said.

"I don't think the artist was a good Muslim," I said, and they both chuckled. They wished me luck with finding a buyer, but didn't make an offer themselves.

Over the next hour, five or six people looked at the magazine and asked questions, most of which I couldn't answer. The imam in charge of the tent came over and gave me a long silent look. I looked right back at him and asked him how business was.

Fatimah came by, the cart loaded with groceries. I offered to wheel it home if she would sit with the magazine. She covered her face and giggled. More realistically, I said I could push the cart home when I was done, if she would take the perishables now. She said no, she'd take it all after she'd done a turn around the tent. That cost me twenty dirham; she found a set of wooden spoons for the kitchen. They were freshly made by a fellow who had set up shop in the opposite corner, running a child-powered lathe, his sons taking turns striding on a treadmill attached by a series of creaking pulleys to the axis of the tool. People may have bought his wares more out of curiosity and pity for his sons than because of the workmanship.

I almost sold it to a fat old man who had lost both ears, I suppose in the war. He offered fifty dirham, but while I was trying to bargain the price up, his ancient crone of a wife charged up and physically hauled him away, shrieking. If he'd had an ear, she would have pulled him by it. The bookseller started to offer his sympathies, but then both of them doubled over in laughter, and I had to join them.

As it turned out, the loss of that sale was a good thing. But first I had to endure my trial.

A barefoot man who looked as if he'd been fasting all year picked up the magazine and leafed through it carefully, mumbling. I knew he was trouble. I'd seen him around, begging and haranguing. He was white, which normally is not a problem with me. But white people who choose to live inside the walls are often types who would not be welcome at home, wherever that might be.

He proceeded to berate me for being a bad Muslim -- not hearing my correction, that I belonged to Chrislam -- and, starting with the licentious cover and working his way through the inside illustrations and advertisements, to the last story, which actually had God's name in the title . . . he said that even a bad Muslim would have no choice but to burn it on the spot.

I would have gladly burned it if I could burn it under him, but I was saved from making that decision by the imam. Drawn by the commotion, he stamped over and began to question the man, in a voice as shrill as his own, on matters of doctrine. The man's Arabic was no better than his diet, and he slunk away in mid-diatribes. I thanked the imam and he left with a slight smile.

Then a wave of silence unrolled across the room like a heavy blanket, I looked to the tent entrance and there were four men: Abdullah Zaragosa, our chief imam, some white man in a business suit, and two policemen in uniform, seriously armed. In between them was an alien, one of those odd creatures visiting from Arcturus.

I had never seen one, though I had heard them described on the radio. I looked around and was sad not to see Fatimah; she would hate having missed this.

It was much taller than the tallest human; it had a short torso but a giraffe-like neck. Its head was something like a bird's, one large eye on either side. It cocked its head this way and that, looking around, and then dropped down to say something to the imam.

They all walked directly toward me, the alien rippling on six legs. Cameras clicked; I hadn't brought one. The imam asked if I was Ahmed Abd al-kareem, and I said yes, in a voice that squeaked.

"Our visitor heard of your magazine. May we inspect it?" I nodded, not trusting my voice, and handed it to him, but the white man took it.

He showed the cover to the alien. "This is what we expected you to look like."

"Sorry to disappoint," it said in a voice that sounded like it came from a cave. It took the magazine in an ugly hand, too many fingers and warts that moved, and inspected it with first one eye, and then the other.

It held the magazine up and pointed to it, with a smaller hand. "I would like to buy this."

"I -- I can't take white people's money. Only dirhams or, or trade."

"Barter," it said, surprising me. "That is when people exchange things of unequal value, and both think they have gotten the better deal."

The imam looked like he was trying to swallow a pill. "That's true enough," I said. "At best, they both do get better deals, by their own reckoning."

"Here, then." It reached into a pocket or a pouch -- I couldn't tell whether it was wearing clothes -- and brought out a ball of light.

It held out the light to a point midway between us, and let go. It floated in the air. "The light will stay wherever you put it."

It shimmered a brilliant blue, with fringes of rainbow colors. "How long will it last?"

"Longer than you."

It was one of the most beautiful things I had ever seen. I touched it with my finger -- it felt cool, and tingled -- and pushed it a few inches. It stayed where I moved it.

"It's a deal, sir. Thank you."

"*Shukran*," it said, and they moved on down the line of tables.

I don't think it bought anything else. But it might have. I kept looking away from it, back into the light.

###

The imams and the white scientists all want to take the light away to study it. Eventually, I will loan it out.

For now, though, it is a Christmas gift to my son and daughter. The faithful, and the merely curious, come to look at it, and wonder. But it stays in my house.

In Chrislam, as in old Islam, angels are not humanlike creatures with robes and wings. They are *male'ikah*, beings of pure light.

They look wonderful on the top of a tree.

The Seder in Space by Paul Levinson

"The Seder in Space" is an excerpt from author Paul Levinson's 2001 novel, [Borrowed Tides](#).

Aaron sat at the head the Seder table. "Everyone knows why we're gathered here this evening," he said, and talked about the meaning of Passover, the Jews were slaves in Egypt, the meaning of the wine and the matzoh...

And Noah, nearly 10 years old, thought about the Stones -- the Rolling Stones -- one of his favorite groups, and their song "2000 Light Years From Home." Well, they weren't that far -- Earth was just 2 light years away now -- but what were a few more decimals among family and friends?

Around this table sat everyone in Noah's world -- everyone he'd ever known in this universe. Aaron with his plush felt yarmulke on his bushy white head, Jack with the little frown that was really the smile that Noah knew was always there, and Noah's biological dad, Roger, who still couldn't talk to him with words. . . . And Uncle Hiro and Uncle Bo and Auntie Viva and Auntie Nikki -- "auhntie not antie, Noah -- even an honorary aunt doesn't want to be called an ant" . . . And of course his mother. And oh yeah, his little sister, Alicia, too.

"... and the *charoses* symbolizes the mortar that the Jewish people used to build the pyramids when they were slaves in Egypt," Aaron said, and passed the stuff around the table. It was a mixture of apples, cinnamon, nuts, and wine -delicious, a lot better tasting than the ancient mortar must have been. Everyone smiled and nodded their appreciation to Hiro.

Alicia was asking the four questions. "Why is this night different from all other nights?" she asked.

"Because we're still way out in deep space, traveling backward in time?" Bo asked.

Aaron laughed. "That's as good an answer as any," he said.

Of course, for Alicia and Noah, space wasn't different -- it was the same. Planet life would be different. And as far as traveling backward in time -- that's all Alicia had ever known. And even Noah had no real memory of what the ship was like when the fuel and food stocks and everything else got less and less as they were used, not more and more.

"Noah, would you like to take over the reading now?" Aaron asked.

"Sure," he said. And Noah read aloud about the four sons -- the Wise Son, the Wicked Son, the Stupid Son, and the Son with No Capacity to Inquire. The Wise Son already understood the reason for the Seder, so the Seder was not necessary for him. The Wicked Son with his arrogance that none of this was true put himself outside of the group, so the Seder wasn't for him either. (Noah always felt like him, because he didn't really believe the ancient stories, and sometimes these Seders went on way too long.) The Stupid Son's questions could be answered very quickly and simply, so no whole convoluted Seder was needed for him. But the son who had not the capacity to inquire -- he posed a problem because no one could know *what* was on his mind. So he was the reason for the Seder, and the telling again and again of the Passover story...

Noah knew what everyone was thinking when he talked about the son with no capacity to inquire. They were thinking about his real father, about Roger. Noah took Roger's hand under the table and squeezed it. It's ok, Dad, he thought.

He could tell Roger the story of their voyage, like the story of Passover. How Aaron had half-tricked

the government to get this voyage going. How Uncle Bo had almost mutinied half way out but Aaron talked Auntie Nikki into overriding Bo. How the crew lost someone they loved -- her name was Sarah. He could talk about the hulk, about their rollback voyage home. But Noah was sure that Roger already knew all of that, and more --

"Let's eat," Aaron finally said, and passed a plate of Hiro's chicken soup that Aaron swore was better than his grandmother's. She must've been one great cook.

Nikki and Bo and Viva and Hiro were gone by eleven. Roger too. Alicia was sleeping on the couch. Aaron and Jack and Kathy were talking around the table, aware that Noah was there but talking as if he wasn't, a scene he had been part of so many times.

"You're worried because you can't do anything," Jack said to Aaron. "Worried not so much because there's a clearcut problem, but more because you couldn't do anything if there were. We've been over this before."

"That's right," Aaron answered. "We have no effect on the universe around us now -- anything we do hasn't happened the very next moment, so every cause is robbed of its effect."

"Has a nice ring to it," Kathy said, dreamily. She finished off a glass of sweet red wine.

"May have a nice ring," Aaron said, "but it means we've lost our power, utterly, to influence anything beyond this ship other than in the infinitesimally immediate term. Even here, inside the *Light Through*, there are lots of things we can't do. We just all go along with the reverse flow. And yes, that always worries me."

"We didn't have all that much effect on the universe going out to Alpha Centauri in the first place," Jack said.

"There's always some loss of control when you're going into the unknown," Aaron replied. "But that was a different situation entirely."

Jack shook his head. "You express a culture that puts itself above the flow -- that thinks it can reorder events to suit its purpose--"

I can do things," Noah blurted out. "I can make events have consequences. I plant seeds and they grow."

That was a mistake, Noah realized. He should learn to keep his mouth shut. That way he learned a lot more. This way, he attracted everyone's attention.

Sure enough, Kathy started to say it's his bedtime--

Fortunately, Aaron broke in. "You're right," he said softly and reached over and rubbed Noah's back. "You do have some power to make new things happen, because you weren't part of the time we're rolling back on. But so far, as best as we can tell, your power -- and Alicia's -- is strictly local."

"And seeds are living systems," Kathy said.

"I know," Noah replied. "We can do things with living systems. All of us. And I can make other things happen here too, inside the ship, but anything that I try to do outside the ship -- like sending out a test marker -- is gone the next minute too."

"Right," Aaron said, "because those markers are subject to the ship's backward displacement in time."

"I know," Noah repeated, "I understand. But here's what I was thinking about: *I* could go out in one of our shuttles. Since I wasn't part of your trip out here -- we're past the part of space where I was born, right? -- don't you think I could control some more things from that shuttle? Because I wouldn't be part of our ship's backward, ahm..."

"Space-time field," Jack said.

"Yeah," Noah said.

"Out of the question," Kathy said.

"You might have more control out there," Aaron said, "and then again, you might just disappear. Because that's not your time. Here, the ship's internal temporal field -- comprised in part of our own living processes -- seems to protect you. I know, it's complicated -- and we don't fully understand all of it yet either. But that's what your mother -- and all of us -- would be worried about if you left this ship."

"And also," Jack said, "why would you even want to try that? Our rollback is going fine just as it is -- we're right on course back to Earth, to the instant we first left on our voyage."

"I don't know," Noah said. "I guess I want to find out what I could do out there -- free of this ship. The *Light Through* the only place I've ever known -- I really have no idea what's going to happen to us when we return."

Aaron said: "You're right about that. I think we all feel that way."

"Out of the question," Kathy said again.

They finally agreed to a limited shuttle jaunt from the ship, with Hiro as well as Noah aboard. The shuttle went about 100,000 miles, then suddenly bounced back to the ship -- "like a rubber band contracting," Hiro kept saying -- though he was pumping the shuttle in the opposite direction.

"The ship's space-time field is too strong," Aaron said to Jack and Kathy, when they thought Noah was asleep in the next room. "The shuttle couldn't overcome our reverse momentum. Could be Hiro's connection to the past is stronger than Noah's freedom from reverse, or maybe Noah's power just doesn't extend beyond this ship."

The ship had an area, a field -- both inside it and a certain unknown distance around it -- that was traveling back with it to the past, Aaron reasoned. Everything in that field was part of the time rollback. But it was even more complicated, because in addition to the ship's field, Aaron thought people on the ship had their own reverse-flowing fields around them too. Everyone except Noah partially and Alicia completely -- because Noah wasn't around for half of the trip out, and Alicia wasn't at all. Except now Noah's was probably completely gone too, because the ship was way past the point in deep space where he was born. So: Noah goes with Hiro on a shuttle in a direction away from the ship, trying to break loose of the ship's reverse pull if they can. They go a fair distance, and then: pop, they snap right back to the ship. Probably because the combination of the ship's backward pull along with Hiro's outweighed Noah's.

"Inconclusive," Jack agreed.

"How's this gonna end?" Aaron asked. "I feel like we're prisoners of this process. We get back to Mars Vestibule, the instant that we left. The 16 years that have just passed for us traveling at half the speed of light, out to Alpha Centauri and back, haven't happened yet for anyone else, haven't happened for the non-living systems on this ship. And then what? Every message that we've sent, every bit of evidence

on this ship, is gone? I just can't fathom our situation when this voyage ends."

"We've been over this already," Jack said. "Recorded scientific evidence isn't the only kind of evidence."

"We have Noah and Alicia," Kathy said.

"Naomi can say we smuggled them on the ship," Aaron said.

"That woman can say anything she wants," Jack said. "But Noah and Alicia are indeed the key. We've got to look to them for our answers."

"I'd feel happier about that if we had some indication of the kids' survivability off this ship, on their own, without someone like Hiro connected to the past, protected by it," Aaron said...

"Don't even think about it," Kathy said. "We're not sending Noah or Alicia out on any shuttle without an adult on board."

"Once we get back to Sol," Aaron continued, "Noah and Alicia will have to live off this ship, in a time in which they never existed."

"You'll frighten him if he hears you say that," Kathy said.

Getting past Bo and Nikki's security rigs three nights later was child's play for Noah, even though he couldn't remember ever feeling like a child. He had the shuttle fueled and coursed and ready to go within an hour. The false readings he'd programmed into the central system would tell anyone who scanned his quarters that he was sound asleep in bed. And the shuttle's readings would say it was in stasis.

But he intended take this shuttle just beyond where Hiro and he had been, and keep it there for two days. That would prove to Aaron and everyone that Noah had real freedom from this ship. He knew that would make Aaron happy. Aaron was worried that the kids wouldn't survive this voyage, but Noah would prove to him that they could.

Noah initiated the final computer check and launch sequence. He took a sip of orange juice. The computer purred in his ear that everything was all right, then --

A screech nearly punctured his eardrum. It was some kind of alarm. He called up visual explains -- someone else was in the shuttle bay!

Noah jabbed a key to stop the launch, got out of his seat, and opened the shuttle hatch. He'd been so careful to make sure no one had followed him.

He walked slowly out the door, ready with an explanation. There'd be hell to pay for this with his mother--

"Mommy's gonna be *very* angry at you," a voice said.

"Alicia, get out of here," Noah said. "It's way past your bedtime. You should be sleeping."

"You should be too," Alicia said.

OK, he had to be calm about this. No point in screaming at a five-year old. "Look, I have something really important I have to do here tonight. And it's important that Mom doesn't know about it. Can I count on you to keep this secret? Please?"

"Mommy says you'll *die* if you go out there," Alicia said, breathlessly.

Noah laughed. "That's ridiculous. You know Mom -- she overreacts about everything."

"What's 'over reacts'?" Alicia asked.

"Well, you know -- she always says things will be worse than they really are. Like when she says you'll get high blood pressure when you're older if you don't eat lots of carrots now."

Alicia smiled. "Or when she yells that your brain will rot away from playing too much virtel?"

"Right," Noah said. "So you shouldn't really listen to her when she says this is dangerous." He pointed to the shuttle, its door open and inviting. "It's nice and safe in there."

A big mistake.

Alicia's eyes seemed to open even wider. She looked at the shuttle and the viewscreen beyond for a long time.

"Can I come too?" she asked.

"No!" Noah said. "I mean, it's perfectly safe and everything, but you're only five years old."

"So?"

"So that means Mom needs you here on the ship..." But Noah realized what he was saying wasn't very convincing. Maybe he should take Alicia along after all.... That would keep this a secret long enough to let them leave. And if what Aaron was saying was right, having Alicia on the shuttle would give it another person who wasn't tied to the past. She was a pain lots of the time, but she came from even less of the rolled-back time than Noah. Maybe her field, or whatever it was, could be just what they needed to break away...

But he still didn't want to take her. And it wasn't just because he was afraid she'd get some of the glory... Noah had to admit that maybe it was because deep inside he believed there was a tiny little chance that maybe the shuttle would never return from this hop. Or return with its passengers dead...

He didn't want to die. He didn't want his little sister to die...

Noah opened the outside panel on the shuttle and poked in the seal-up and return-to-stasis sequence. The lights went off inside.

"What are we gonna do now?" Alicia asked.

"We're going back to bed." And he took Alicia's hand and they walked out the door and quickly down the halls. . .

Noah slid under the covers and closed his eyes, and remembered what he'd heard Aaron say about this ship.

It was like a never-ending Seder. It was like Planet Earth. It didn't want you to leave.

Njàbò by Claude Lalumière

"Njàbò" first appeared in On Spec, vol. 15, no. 3 (Fall 2003) and was republished in Kenoma, December 2004.

Njàbò, my only child, my daughter, walks with me. She is as old as the forest, while I was born but three and a half decades ago. Our ears prick up at the sound of drums. We scan the sky and spot a column of smoke to the northwest. We run toward it. The ground trembles under our feet.

The settlement is ringed by rotting carcasses. Their faces are mutilated, but the meat is left uneaten. These are the bodies of our people.

I weep, but Njàbò is past tears. She sheds her calf body. Njàbò the great, the wise, the ancient thunders with anger; her flapping ears rouse the wind.

Njàbò charges the human settlement, trumpeting her fury. Everywhere there is ivory, carved into jewellery and other trinkets, evidence of the mutilation of our people. She squeezes the life out of the humans and pounds them on the ground. The humans and their houses are crushed beneath the powerful feet of the giant Njàbò. She kicks down the fireplaces and tramples the ashes. She screams her triumph.

Njàbò's shouts go on for hours. Our scattered tribe gathers from around the world to the site of Njàbò's victory.

Throughout all of this I have been weeping, from pride and awe at Njàbò's beauty, from horror at the deaths of both elephants and humans, from relief, from grief, from sadness and loneliness at my child's independence. And, like too many nights of the past eight years, I wake, quietly weeping, from this dream that is always the same.

#

Waters is sitting on Cleo's chest, nuzzling her nose, purring. Cleo's cheeks are crusty from dried tears. She guesses that she's been awake for two hours or so. She's been lying on her back -- motionless, eyes wide open -- trying to forget the dream and the emotions it brings. The skylight above the bed reveals that dawn is breaking. She should get up, get started.

She stretches. It sends Waters leaping from her chest and out through the beaded curtain in the doorway. Cleo slides out of bed, two king-size futons laid side-by-side on the floor. She looks at her lovers in the diffused early-morning light: a domestic ritual that marks the beginning of her day.

Tall, graceful, long-legged Tamara, with her baby-pink skin, rosebud breasts, and long hair dyed in strands of different colours, has kicked off the sheet, lying on her back.

The hard curve of West's shoulder peeks out from under the sheet he holds firmly under his armpit.

Assaad is sleeping on his stomach, his face buried in his pillow, his arm now stretched out over Cleo's pillow, his perfectly manicured feet sticking out from the bed, as always.

And Patrice -- gorgeous, broad-shouldered Patrice -- isn't back from work yet.

#

Patrice comes home from the night shift at The Small Easy to find Cleo yawning over the kitchen table,

the night's tears not yet washed away. He crouches and hugs her from behind.

"You look so tired, baby." Cleo can hear the smile in his quiet voice, the smile she's always found so irresistible.

She turns and rubs her face against his chest. "I didn't sleep well last night."

Patrice kisses her on the forehead. "Then go back to bed. Let me make breakfast." Again, that smile. She feels herself melting, almost going to sleep in his arms.

"But," she says, yawning, "you've been cooking all night at the café. You should rest."

He laughs and pats her butt. "I'll be alright, Cleo. Allow me the pleasure of taking care of you, okay?"

She thinks, Can you make my dream go away? But she says nothing. She squeezes his hand, forces a smile, and leaves the kitchen.

#

For a few seconds, Cleo is confused, does not know where she is. Has she been sleeping? And then she remembers. This is the girls' bedroom, the girls' bed. The curtains are drawn, the door is ajar. What time is it?

She'd quietly snuck into the girls' room after Patrice had come home, careful not to wake them up. She'd crawled in between them and was calmed by their sweet, eight-year-old smells. She had only meant to lie down until Patrice called breakfast. Where were the girls now?

Shouldn't Cleo be smelling tea, pancakes, eggs, toast? Hearing the chaotic banter of the breakfast table?

The kitchen is deserted and wiped clean. Indefatigable Patrice, again. No-one leaves a kitchen as spotless as he does. She looks at the clock: it's nearly half past noon. She can't remember the last time she slept in. Last night, the dream was more vivid than usual; it drained her.

Her mouth feels dry. She gets orange juice from the fridge and gulps it down. She wanders from room to room. She stops in the bathroom to splash her face.

The quiet is strange. She usually spends the morning and early afternoon tutoring the girls. West must be at the university, Assaad at The Smoke Shop. Patrice, she notices, is sleeping. Waters is curled up on the pillow next to his head. Where are the girls? And then she remembers: Tamara is back. She must have taken them out somewhere.

Tamara has just two days ago returned from a six-month trip to Antarctica. She brought back photographs she'd taken of strange vegetation, species that paleobiologists claim have not grown for millions of years.

Cleo ends her tour of the house with Tamara's office and is startled to see her sitting at her computer, fiddling with the photos from her trip. "Tam?"

"Clee, love, come." Tamara, naked as she almost always is around the house, waves her over. Cleo is enchanted by her beauty, more so all the time. Cleo missed her while she was away.

Cleo settles in Tamara's lap. Tamara is so tall that Cleo's head only reaches up to her neck. Tamara's poised nudity makes Cleo feel frumpy and unattractive, especially now that she notices the rumpled state of her own clothes, slept-in all morning. The feeling evaporates as Tamara squeezes her, digging her nose into Cleo's neck, breathing her in. "I haven't been back long enough to stop missing you, Clee. There were no other women on the expedition." Tamara pulls off Cleo's T-shirt, cups her sagging

breasts. As always, Cleo is fascinated by the chiaroscuro of the soft pink of Tamara's skin against her own dark brown. "They were like little boys, nervous at having their clubhouse invaded by a female, at having their secret handshakes revealed, protective of their toys."

"Tam ... Where are the girls?" How could Cleo have thought that Tamara had taken the girls out? Of all of them, Tamara was the least interested in the girls. She let them crawl all over her when they felt like it and was unfalteringly affectionate with them, but she never set aside time for them. She was vaguely uneasy with the idea of children.

"West took them to school. At breakfast, he talked about his lecture, to warm up. His class today is about the symbolic use of animals in politics. One of his case studies is about African elephants. You should have seen Njàbò! She got very excited and asked him tons of questions. She wanted to go hear West at school, and he thought it would be a treat for both of them. Especially seeing as how you seemed to need the sleep."

"I can't believe Sonya would be interested in that..."

Tamara runs her fingers through Cleo's hair and says, "Doesn't Sonya always do what Njàbò wants? Sometimes I think all of us are always doing what Njàbò wants. She'll grow into a leader, that one. She'll trample anyone in her path."

Cleo is momentarily reminded of her dream, but she makes an effort to push it away. She jokes, "Wanna play hooky and go out for lunch? At The Small Easy?"

#

Eight years ago, Cleo gave birth to Njàbò. Most people thought that the girl looked like Patrice, especially because of her dark skin -- like Patrice's, darker than Cleo's -- but she could just as easily have been fathered by West or Assaad. The five of them had agreed not to do any tests to find out.

Assaad was Sonya's biological father and her legal guardian. She'd been the daughter of their friends Karin and Pauline. Both women had died in a car accident the day after Njàbò was born. Sonya was three months older than Njàbò.

A few days later, a grey-brown cat jumped through the kitchen window while Patrice was preparing breakfast. The cat drank water from a dirty bowl in the sink, and then refused to leave. The family adopted him and called him Waters.

#

At The Small Easy, while waiting for their order, Tamara goes to the washroom. A few seconds after she gets up, a man wearing a denim jacket materializes in her seat. One moment the seat is empty; the next, the man is there. Cleo is seized with a paralyzing fear. The man is short, almost like a child, but his face is that of an old man. His wrinkled skin is a washed-out greyish brown. He grabs both her hands in his. She feels his fingers, like vises, almost crushing the bones of her hands. "Do not fear your dreams. Do not fear Njàbò. You, too, are one of us, daughter. Believe in Njàbò. Follow her." He vanishes as inexplicably as he appeared. Still numb with fear, all Cleo can focus on is how the old man hadn't spoken in English, but in what she assumes must have been an African language. How had she understood him?

Tamara returns. Cleo says nothing about the old man.

#

When Cleo and Tamara come back from lunch, the girls are still out with West. There's a message on

the voicemail. He's taking them out downtown; there's a new Brazilian restaurant he's curious about, and then they'll go the Museum of Civilizations. He says he'll pose in front of the paintings and sculptures and have the girls try to figure out his ancestry. His favourite joke.

When asked about his roots, West never gives the same answer. A mix of Cree and Russian? Hawaiian and Korean? Tibetan and Lebanese? He looks vaguely Asian, but his features don't conform to any specific group. He loves to confuse people, to meddle with their expectations. His odd wit has always charmed Cleo.

Thinking of his easy silliness helps take the edge off her strange encounter at The Small Easy. Cleo takes this opportunity to give herself the day off from mothering and housekeeping.

She goes down to her sanctum. In the basement of their house, she's set up a studio. There's a small window high up on the wall, but she keeps it covered, lets no natural light in. She burns scented candles and incense. She's comfortable painting only in the dim, flickering light, breathing in a rich blend of odours. Full, harsh light makes her feel exposed. The dim candlelight, the smoke, and the smells all contribute to a sense of being enveloped, of being in a cocoon, a womb, in a world where only she and her imagination exist. Sometimes, like today, she smokes a pipeful of hash, not only to relax but also to enrich the room's aroma. Today, she needs to relax.

Had she hallucinated that man in the restaurant? She can still remember the feel of his rough hands against her smooth skin. His smell: like damp soil. How could he know about her secret dream?

She holds the smoke in her lungs as long as she can before blowing it out. She wants the hash to wash out her fears and anxieties. She wants to paint.

The hash is strong. She feels its effects within a few seconds, a soothing combination of numbness, purpose, and timelessness. She loses herself in the canvas.

She emerges from her drugged creative trance. Hours later? Minutes? It is darker: only a handful of candles are still burning.

She goes to the sink and splashes her face with water. She forms a cup with her hands and drinks from it.

She lights a few fresh candles and returns to the canvas. She finds that she has painted a scene from her dream, one of the most violent moments. She had never before let herself depict such brutality. The giant elephant, who, in her dreams, is somehow her daughter Njàbò, is trampling humans beneath her enormous feet. She is throwing a mangled man in the air with her trunk. Cleo notices that she has painted words in the background, including "NJÀBÒ" -- but also other strange words that she has never heard of before, such as "MÒKÌLÀ" and "MOKIDWA."

"Why are you afraid of the dream?" Cleo is startled by this intrusion.

Njàbò?

Cleo turns, but her daughter doesn't wait to hear the answer. Cleo hears her rush up the stairs and shut the door. Does she know that Cleo has no answer? Cleo isn't surprised that Njàbò knows about her recurring dream. She's scared, and what scares her most, somehow, is that lack of surprise.

#

It was Patrice who had known what "Njàbò" meant, but Cleo who named the baby. How had it come to her?

After the midwife had left, the whole family had slipped into bed with Cleo and the new baby. Cleo had immediately fallen asleep, exhausted from the long labour. She had slept deeply, had not remembered any dreams, but had woken knowing the baby's name. "I think I want to call her Njàbò," it was an odd-sounding word that meant nothing to her, "but I don't know why."

Patrice, who had been devastated by the elephant tragedy and had read many books to assuage his grief, recognized it. The last elephant, a female African forest elephant on a reserve in the Congo, had died nearly a year before Njàbò's birth. Poaching, loss of habitat due to increasing human encroachment, spiteful slaughters in backlash against conservationists, and disease had finally taken their toll. All efforts at cloning had failed and were still failing.

"I know!" Patrice had said. "Njàbò ... Njàbò is a mythical creature from Africa: the mother of all elephants. A giant with enormous tusks who appears whenever the elephants need a strong leader. All elephants gather around her when she calls. It's a beautiful name. A strong name for our strong girl. I like it." Everyone had agreed. Cleo had pushed aside the question of how the name had come to her. It was one of those unsolvable riddles best left alone.

Now, looking at the name on the canvas, she is more convinced than ever that she had never heard or seen the name before it mysteriously came to her eight years ago.

#

The dream now plagues Cleo nightly. She is always tired, never getting enough sleep, never fully rested.

She avoids Njàbò. She has begged off mothering. Tamara, Patrice, West, and Assaad now share the task. Cleo, after all, has taken on the bulk of that work for the past eight years, devoted her time and life to raising Njàbò and Sonya, to taking care of the house while the four of them pursued their careers. There had been that book with Tamara, five years ago, when the girls were three years old. The paintings, the shows, the tours. Of course, they say to Cleo, she should explore that aspect of her life again, let someone else take care of the house, the girls.

Tonight, the house is quiet. The whole family has gone for a walk in the park. It rained all day, and finally the cloud cover broke to give way to a warm evening. Cleo had agreed to go, but begged off at the last minute. Assaad, especially, insisted that she come along, to spend time with the family. But in the end she'd stayed alone in the house. Well, not quite alone.

Waters follows her as she walks into the living room. She takes down a big art book from a shelf built into the wall. Cleo sits on the floor; Waters sits in front of her, purring and rubbing his head on her knee. She opens the book at random and remembers.

#

The book, *The Absence of Elephants*, was a worldwide success. Trying to exorcize her dream, which she never talked about, Cleo had created a series of elephant paintings. Some were scenes from her dreams, but not all. She had used no photographic references. The results ranged from photorealism to evocative abstractions. She painted in the evenings when the girls were asleep in bed. The whole family was extremely excited about her paintings. Patrice and Njàbò, especially, spent hours looking at them, but it was Tamara who had been inspired by them.

Tamara had sold her publisher on the idea: an art book combining Cleo's paintings with photos of forests and plains where elephants used to thrive, of human constructions that now stood in areas that were once habitats for elephants. There would be no words: the pictures, especially in the wake of the

global desolation over the extinction of the elephants, would speak in all languages, allowing the book to be marketed worldwide without the cost of translation. Tamara would go to Africa, India, and anywhere else where any elephants -- even woolly mammoths -- had once lived, hunting with her camera the ghosts of the dead creatures.

The Absence of Elephants led to gallery bookings. Cleo's paintings, along with Tamara's photographs, were hung in cities all over the world, from Buenos Aires and Montreal to Glasgow and Sydney ... but not in India, where the book was too hot politically. The two women had gone on tour with their work -- wine, food, and five-star hotels all expensed. It had been a glamorous, exciting experience for Cleo -- and it had forged a complicit bond between the two women. Before then, Cleo had often been intimidated by the beautiful Tamara's fashionable elegance.

The book, the sales of paintings and signed, numbered prints of Tamara's photos, the DVD-ROM, the web rights, and the CGI Imax film had made the family not quite wealthy, but certainly at ease.

West took a sabbatical from the university and looked after the house and the children. After nearly a year of book tours, art galleries, and media appearances, Cleo missed Njàbò and Sonya, yearned to return to domestic life. She came back home, to the girls. For the next few years, she rarely painted. But the dream continued to haunt her.

#

Cleo now spends entire days in her studio, has even taken to locking herself in. Sometimes she stands silently behind the door, listening to the others talk about her. They assume that she has been overtaken by a new creative storm, is painting a new series, and needs time alone to focus her creative energies.

In truth, Cleo's days disappear in a cloud of hash. She hides from her fears: of Njàbò, of what she would paint if she were to take up the brush, of being in public, vulnerable to the appearance of the wrinkled old man.

#

The first thing Cleo thinks is: Patrice and Assaad look so uncomfortable sleeping on that small ugly couch. Patrice is lying on top of Assaad, resting his head on Assaad's shoulder. Assaad's arms are wrapped around Patrice, one hand on the small of his back, the other on his shoulder blade. "Patty? Assaad?" The two men snap awake. And then Cleo peers around the room, touching the mattress beneath her. She thinks: Is this a hospital bed?

Cleo notices that Patrice looks worried, but she can't read Assaad, whose face is even more inscrutable than usual. Getting up, the men stand on either side of Cleo, each wrapping one of her hands in their own. Cleo takes her hands back before they can say anything. "Enough. This is too much. Go sit down. What am I doing here?"

They go back to the couch. Assaad squeezes Patrice's hand, nodding at him to speak. "No, love, you tell her." Patrice says. "You found her."

Assaad looks straight into Cleo's eyes, willing her to keep her eyes locked on his. His voice is dry ice, fuming with wisps of cold mist. "None of us had seen you for more than a day. For weeks, you've been distant, aloof, oblivious to the girls, oblivious to all of us."

Cleo's muscles tighten up, in a reflex effort to protect herself. She's never heard Assaad speak in such a cold, hard voice before.

"We thought you were working on a new series. You let us believe that."

Assaad pauses, his eyes still locked on Cleo's. Is he waiting for an explanation? Or a reaction? Cleo wants to look away, but can't.

"As I said, we hadn't seen you for more than a day. You hadn't come to bed the night before. You'd locked yourself in your studio. The girls and I were ready to have lunch. I knocked on your door, calling you, inviting you to eat with us. You didn't answer. I knocked harder. Yelled out your name. Still, you didn't answer. I had to take the door out. I found you unconscious. The air was foul. You'd pissed yourself. Vomited."

Again, a pause. Cleo feels the cold mist of Assaad's anger go down her throat, into her stomach. Cleo has never seen Assaad like this. Of all of them, he is the most patient, the most understanding, the one who resolves conflicts, soothes hurts and pains. How could she have let it come to this?

"There was but one new painting. Later, Njàbò told us you'd painted that one weeks ago, the day West brought them to his class. I called the ambulance. I couldn't rouse you."

Another pause. Patrice fills the tense silence. "The doctor told us you were suffering from dehydration and malnutrition. Why haven't you been eating? What have you been doing? Are you angry with us? Speak to us, Clee, we all love you. Maybe we should have been more attentive. You were looking weak, tired. We should have paid attention. We were all too preoccupied, with work and with the girls. Why are you hiding from us? What are you hiding from us?" Patrice's voice gets louder and increasingly reproachful. "Why did you let this happen?"

Assaad looks away from Cleo, puts his hand on Patrice's shoulder, calms him, and, in the process, calms himself. Patrice frowns, "I'm sorry, Clee, I-- I'm just worried about you."

"Patty, I..." She avoids their faces. She feels ashamed. Why has she kept the dream a secret all these years? The dream is a chasm into which intimacy is falling ever further from her grasp. Can it reemerge from those depths after so many years of secrecy? "How ... How are the girls?"

"They're fine, Clee. Assaad quit his job at The Smoke Shop. He's a great mother." Patrice's grin fills his whole face. He ruffles Assaad's hair, kissing him on the cheek. Assaad fights a losing battle against the grin spreading on his face. "We didn't really need the money. It's a stimulating change to be at home with the girls. It's a challenge to teach them, and to learn from them."

"Who's taking ca--"

Assaad answers, "They're with West today. He took them to see the new Katgirl & Canary movie that they've both been so excited about."

"How long have I been here?"

Patrice glances at Assaad, then gets up and sits next to her on the bed, stroking her face. "You've been out for four days. It's Sunday."

Cleo closes her eyes. She wishes she knew why she's been so apprehensive, why she's been hiding a part of herself from her lovers. She remembers falling in love with Patrice when she was still waiting on tables at The Small Easy. She remembers him introducing her to his family -- Assaad, Tamara, West; her family, now. She takes a blind leap. "I've been having this dream..."

#

The Baka -- the few hundred who remain -- live in the forest, in a territory that covers part of Cameroon and the Congo. They believe -- or believed, Cleo isn't sure -- that the Mòkilà were a tribe of shapeshifters, both elephant and human. The Mòkilà would raid Baka villages and initiate the captives

into their secret society. Their sorcerers, the mokidwa, would transform their captives into shapeshifters. The captives became Mòkilà and were never again seen by their families.

The mokidwa could take on the form of any animal. They also knew the secret of invisibility.

Njàbò is the ancestor of all elephants, sometimes male, sometimes female. Stories abound of avatars of Njàbò, giant cows or bulls, leading herds of elephants against Baka warriors or villages. Njàbò's tusks are so enormous, they contain ten other tusks within them. Njàbò is often flanked by a retinue of guards.

Cleo has been trying to demystify her experiences. She searched the web for those strange words on her painting and found them. She asked West to get books from the university library. She's been reading on the Baka and the myth of Njàbò. She's never cared before about her ancestry and now finds herself wondering if perhaps there are Baka or Mòkilà among her ancestors. The Mòkilà are a myth, she reminds herself.

She's been painting again. The new canvasses are violent, raw. When she painted her first series years ago, she hadn't felt this uninhibited. Now, every session leaves her exhausted, yet exhilarated. Having shared her dream with her family, she has nothing to hide. She feels free.

She is still dreaming every night, but the dream is changing. Now the whole family walks with Njàbò. And the dream is getting longer. There is more violence, more bloodshed. Njàbò leads the tribe around the world. They crush all human constructions. They kill all the humans. Theirs is an unstoppable stampede. Cleo has painted much of this. Now, the dream continues beyond the violence. The tribe walks the Earth in peace. The tribe grows and Njàbò reigns. Today, for the first time, Cleo's painting is inspired by that part of the dream.

The others tell her that they, too, have started dreaming of Njàbò, the elephant.

She leaves her door open; sometimes the others come down and watch her work, quietly, discreetly. At first, she knew, they were keeping an eye on her, worried that she would withdraw once again. After a few weeks, that changed. Now they come down because they find it exciting to be in the room while Cleo is painting. The candlelight, the thick odours, and her absolute devotion to the canvas all combine to create a mesmerizing ambience. Even Waters has been spending hours curled up under her stool.

Every day, Njàbò comes, silently, to see her paint. Cleo is still nervous around her daughter, still avoids talking with her. Cleo can feel that Njàbò is in the room now. The painting is finished. It depicts Njàbò, the elephant, towering over her herd, young elephants running around her, playing, celebrating. Around the elephants, the forest is lush.

Njàbò, the eight-year-old girl, walks up to her mother, in silence. She gazes at the painting. Cleo sees the tears running down her daughter's cheeks. Cleo gathers Njàbò in her lap. The girl buries her head in her mother's breasts. They both cry. Cleo can't remember crying with such abandon, feeling so cleansed by the act. She hugs her daughter, firmly, proudly.

#

I am awakened by a light kiss on the mouth. Njàbò has crawled into bed, is holding my hand. Sonya is behind her, quiet, submissive. Njàbò whispers, "I am the dream."

Njàbò rouses the entire family, kissing them one by one: Patrice, West, Assaad, and, finally, Tamara. She whispers lovingly to each of them, her lips brushing their ears.

She leads the family outside. The street is deserted in the middle of the night. Njàbò turns to face us all

together. We are all naked.

Looking straight into my eyes, Waters rubs himself against Njàbò's leg. Behind my daughter, a group of old men materializes. The mokidwa have shed their invisibility.

Njàbò smiles. Soon, the ground will tremble.

Sugar Pines by Elizabeth A. Mierzejewski



Illustration by Elizabeth A. Mierzejewski

This was his thirty-seventh season surveying the trees. Lot Bisholm knew it to be his last. He made his last survey of the evening, checking each of the dying sugar pines as he made his way back to the warmth of a makeshift yurt in the Cascade Range. He filled out the form for *Cronartium ribicola*, the fungus claiming the pine, tree by tree. The golden rust climbed and claimed each trunk and branch. It spread dewy spores, covering and suffocating the bark and needles of the arboreal giants.

Lot caressed the samples he stored in the plastic bags he kept at his hip. The dying light of the evening sun made the spores glow a preternatural gold. Although Lot mourned the loss of the pines, he could not curse the fungus any more than he could blame the cancer that took his Emily just fifteen years ago. There was no one to blame; no one to earn his anger. He perched his glasses on the top of his head. Just ahead he could make out his yurt, the early evening fire inside making the canvas glow. He moved the plastic bags into the leather satchel he carried, leaving it all by the woodpile just outside the door. It would be no trouble for anyone to locate the bag. No trouble at all.

He grabbed a few of the drier logs. Some of the debris flaked off from termite abuse and moisture from last night's storm, but mostly it was dry. Once inside, Lot dropped the logs next to the dwindling fire. He rubbed his wrinkled rough hands on his jeans before more carefully selecting a log for the night's dinner prep. It was a much crisper day since the storm had passed, and was giving way to the signs of early winter.

The beans and bacon were nearly done. His stores were running low, but he was leaving tonight. He put

his glasses on the bedside log. A candle which he was using as an additional light was spent, and Lot rummaged through a foot locker to retrieve another.

A forgotten photograph of Emily surfaced. He liked to think of her living, not static, but this picture was different. She had been caught in the act of turning around. Surprised by the camera, a smile salted her lips. This had been early on in her treatment, but not before the cancer had been ignored. This picture documented a strength that would not last. Even in looming sadness, she was beautiful and he loved her. Even then. Especially now. His fingers traced the outline of her thinning hair. He paused for a moment and sighed.

"Emily..." He removed the photograph from its frame and put it in his shirt pocket. Lot cleared his throat.

With the pines dying, winter encroaching, and the post-storm wind edging itself underneath the canvas walls, Lot grabbed one of the drying logs and used it to brace the most offending opening along the bottom of the yurt. He reinforced the fire with one more log, ignoring the boiled burn and old-can taste. It was good enough for a last meal.

He changed into his best plaid. It was lined and warm, with not a single button gone. He transferred the photograph of Emily into his breast pocket, buttoning it closed. A sweater, then his coat. He thrust his work gloves into the pockets, still sticky with residue from the pines and searched for the woolen cap. When he found it, a mouse had procured enough of Emily's yarn for a nest, leaving holes gaping. *Nature does it what it needs to go on*, he thought. *Who could be mad at a mouse?* He rummaged through a discarded carton, finding the remnants of breakfast cereal. Pouring the crumbs onto toque, he placed the offering on the ground.

The December evening sky was a fingernail slit of pale pink. Lot ducked back into the yurt and kicked sand into the fire. He used the candle to light the Coleman lantern. Like the Pacific winters, the flame was gentle and took its time. Just outside the yurt, Lot tied and secured each window flap and the door. He checked and secured the stakes with the heel of his ax.

Lot carried the remains of his food supply, wrapped up in a rag, in one hand and in the other he carried his shovel. He could fold it and attach it onto the belt, but he liked the feel of its heft in his hand. His hand ax was looped in his belt. Several hundred yards from the base of camp, he dug a hole and tossed in the rag. He carried the shovel and the hand ax with him down to the tributary of the Snake River, which he could follow down to Henry Lake back into civilization, but he knew he wouldn't. He would die here.

In the dark he could still make out the silhouettes of the volcanic range, and he remembered why he came here. He remembered how Emily had gasped at the sight. He had acted like he had not been fazed, but in truth, he relived his first view of the Cascades through her eyes at that gasp. He had embraced her in a way he could never embrace the range, but he always felt that each intimate moment was the three of them. He had loved it alone for fifteen years.

And the sugar pines were dying. The two-foot long cones futilely dispersed their seeds, only to be overcome by the rust. Lot's cataloged and collected data would amount to nothing but an epilogue, or even an epitaph. It waited in waterproof bags, leaning against his yurt.

The little river was slightly swollen after the rain. The moon reflected in shattered bits like a broken mirror on the surface. Lot could see his breath condensing. He was just rising to leave when he began to hear it: a whistle in the night wind, perhaps? Or maybe the cry of some winter bird? He paid no notice. The sound came again. Closer this time, and more like the drawn-out yelping of a fox. But it

wasn't that, either. The full moon was lighting the banks and he tried to find the source of the noise. "One last glimpse of a fox," he said out loud.

The sound of his voice surprised him a bit, seeming too sharp for these woods. The cry had stopped. The wind halted and Lot turned his head to better hear the other side of the river. What he heard was muffled, like a sobbing into a towel. This was no fox. He searched the bank and the surrounding scrub, looking for any movement, any tell. Standing as still as possible, the darkness shrouded him. He waited.

Against the bone-whiteness of the shore, Lot saw something emerge from the shrubs. It was big. Bigger than himself. It seemed impossibly large on top of two spindly legs, and dark dark dark.

It was still for a moment, and it seemed to break in half. Then the shape grew tall and thin once more, a largeness on the ground before it.

It was two beasts, one carrying the other. The cries became wails, clearer this time. Lot pulled back and drew in a breath. The beast across the river stooped down, close again to the motionless companion on the ground. It seemed to be looking for Lot. The beast's head scanned Lot's side of the tributary. He was sure it had spotted him in the dark. It struggled to pick up the body, but collapsed instead. This time it let out a loud hoot. It echoed like the last shout he had made when they laid Emily in the ground.

With great deliberation, Lot lowered himself onto the cold beach. Not once did he take his eyes off the other side. The hulking shapes did not move, but the larger one was bent over, perhaps seated next to the one lying on the beach. The stillness went on for hours. It was dawn before there was movement on either side.

With the vaguest of morning light, Lot could see more clearly. What seemed black and huge the night before now seemed a mass of wool-blanket gray hair. Slightly slumped over and half asleep, it sat guarding its companion. The other was dead. It was brown, with a hint of silver, and much smaller than the one which had carried it to this clearing. The head of the living beast was huge and bullet-shaped, like a gorilla's, but with a face that held more intelligence; the torso elongated, not at all like a four-footed beast. The label 'Sasquatch' persisted, and Lot decided it would have to do. It jerked its head back, fighting the sleep. Lot tried not to laugh, the move so familiar. He had done it enough himself during the rare church service he would relent in going to with Emily. But he did laugh, and the beast became fully awake and looked at Lot square in the face.

What Lot saw there in its face was not animal fear, not in the usual way. Once it spotted Lot, both arms went to pull close the body of the other. The sudden recall of the death made it cry out once again. The beast rocked, cleaving to its lifeless companion. The arms of the dead mate hung and swayed. It tried in vain to stand and carry off its mate, but all strength was gone. Lot knew it must have been traveling for hours, perhaps even days, before it had nearly collapsed there at the river's edge. It rocked and it watched Lot.

Lot edged up taking care not to alarm it. His arms and legs had grown stiff in the December night, and his knees complained. Sleeping on the ground was no new adventure, but motionless sleep was not typical by any means. He was not young anymore.

When he looked back across the water, it was standing. It had laid its mate on the ground again, but the beast stood erect and watched Lot. It grunted something, clearly loud enough for Lot to hear. He was meant to hear it, he was sure. The phrase, if it could be called that, was repeated. Lot stopped moving. Watching the Sasquatch he was sure it was making contact. A threat or a warning at the very least, but communication to be sure. The next grunt was even louder.

"I'm sorry, old friend..." said Lot. What does one say, other than condolences, thought Lot. The Sasquatch gestured with one arm. A human would mean it as a beckoning. Lot was not willing to take that chance. He waited. He did not wait for very long.

This time, the Sasquatch insisted. Its grunt was a persistent howl, with a healthy mix of glossolalia with a voice both melodic and primitive, but not threatening. It reissued its invitation that Lot join it on the other side. Surely the Sasquatch would see it as rude for him to do otherwise. So Lot waded across the swollen stream. He landed a few hundred feet downstream and waited to see what his host would do. Not once did the Sasquatch's eyes drop.

Lot stood, not sure what to do now that he was on the same side. The look on its face was still pained, and Lot could see its hand stroking his mate's head. He had to look away, embarrassed to intrude on such a tender moment. He wiped his nose and cleared his throat.

"So... here we are." Still nothing changed for another minute. Lot decided to focus on his own breathing, matching it to the rise and fall of the Sasquatch's chest. It scratched its face, and Lot mimicked the motion. It paused. Turning its head to the side, the Sasquatch let out a long whistle, and watched for a response. He turned his head to the side and whistled a dry, cold, burring whistle. Again, the Sasquatch paused. Lot was sure he could see it thinking. Thinking about something new, something not static, and Lot smiled.

It smiled back. The smile was odd and feral but brimming with a genuine relief. It beckoned Lot over once again and Lot made his way over. He began to sing quietly a love song he shared with Emily. It was low and soft, and he could hear her voice in the back of his head taking the tune somewhere new.

"Darling, to love a face like mine..." He was just feet away now. The musky odor was undeniable. "Your blindness touches on divine..." He used his sleeve to absorb the water pooling in the corners of his eyes. He could see the Sasquatch's mate close now, her mouth gaping open, yellow crust at the eyes and lips. For just a moment, he imagined an intubation tube, but he brushed the image away. "my heart won't turn away..."

So close, the musky smell of the hair was overwhelmed by the nutty, fermented breath. The Sasquatch's eyes were red, even swollen. Lot sat down next to them, and both were silent. The Sasquatch resumed the caress, more deliberate as it touched the ears, the hairline and each wrinkle about the nose.

Lot pulled Emily's photograph from his pocket and showed it to the beast. It touched the picture, eyes narrowing. Thick fingers tapped the image and grasped the edge. It took the picture and sniffed. With gentleness it put the photo in its mouth and grunted low, handing it back to Lot. It took Lot's free hand and placed it on the breast bone of its lost mate. He found it cold, stiff and wet. He dared not remove his hand. And now the few tears were making their way down his cheek. Before Lot could wipe them away with the hand holding the picture, he began to cry. He wept and the Sasquatch mourned with him. It lasted until the gray dawn became true morning. The Sasquatch stood up.

It was clear Lot was to follow it into the pines. Some were deeply scourged by the fungus, others long past dead. Cones littered the ground, but they were small and sickly and deformed. He nearly ran into the back of his companion, not noticing the creature had stopped. It laid the body down and got to its knees. It began to scrape at the needles and thinning topsoil which had not given over to the early winter frost just yet. Looking up, a gesture and a grunt insisted on Lot's help. He still had the small geologic shovel clipped to his belt. He unfolded it and began to dig.

It took over an hour. The hole was deep enough now to hold the body and still be hidden from scavengers. The body looked to weigh at least four hundred pounds, and taller than Lot by a head. His

sixty-seven year old frame would not be moving it beyond some sort of ceremonial kindness. He was saved the difficulty by the Sasquatch pushing Lot away just a bit. It climbed into the hole and grabbed the body under her arms, laying it down. It tried to close her mouth, but rigor mortis had taken hold. The Sasquatch pulled some of the local grasses and placed them across her chest. It placed more across her eyes. After a moment, it began to push the dirt back into the hole. Crying was done. Any future mourning would be as private as this grave.

They stood together in one last silence. Just as the Sasquatch was turning to leave, it said something. A song sweet and chirpy bubbled from its throat. It touched Lot on his jacket, fingering the pocket flap where he had stored Emily's photograph. Before he could summon up a response the Sasquatch crossed easily over the shrubs and blended into the low foliage and sugar pines.

Back at the beach Lot crossed back over to his side of the river. He unclipped the shovel from his belt and dug out his few remaining supplies from last night's crypt. He would need them to make the trip back to town.

A Different Breed of Cat by Toiya Kristen Finley

Wasn't my intention to deal with Dutch's son again, but the past 24 hours left me a little punch drunk. When a man's not even sure where to find his asshole anymore, he'd do just about anything to retrieve it. I left a note in Dutch's son's mailbox to send the white boy to come talk to me at Staley's. I didn't want to make up my mind about Old Dutch. There was some truth to all them stories. Yeah. But that didn't mean they were real, that last night was real. The bar was mostly empty on Sunday afternoon. One couple over in the booth by the bathroom. The girl sat next to the wall, but she rested her head against his shoulder. Her bra was so tight it pushed the long, deep slit of her tits out her tank top. His hand crept up the middle of her thigh, them carryin on no different than all those couples trapped in here years ago before the blues man took the stage.

Bug nodded at me from behind the bar. I took a table in front of the TV. A baseball game, Cardinals vs. Reds, not that I knew anybody who bothered watchin baseball anymore. These weren't the same tables back from that night. They used to be wood, and these were formica, but the little bar I'd been sneakin into since I was eleven was suddenly strange. This was the place I'd almost died, and these might as well've been the same wooden tables and sawdust-covered floors, even though I remembered when they ripped up the floorboards and put in blue-specked tiles.

"I'm surprised you picked Staley's, considering last night." The white boy was more casual this time around in a white shirt with long sleeves--in the middle of the summer, no less--olive slacks hangin low on his hips with a tan belt, and a backwards baseball cap. He dared to shake my hand. "You getting us some beer?"

"Not without fake ID."

He sat. "Nope. Thought you might have some ins. I'm not really into beer, anyway."

Bug had stepped out back, but when he saw the white boy with me, he came over and gave him a hug. "What's sup? You been away too long, for real!"

#

I came home yesterday afternoon to discover the old blues man in the living room with Mama. Seein

me, he laughed. String of phlegm clung from his palate to his tongue. His undershirt striped the collar of his doody-brown polyester suit with sweat. Old Dutch leaned back in Daddy's recliner. With both hands wrapped around the mahogany-claw handle, he tapped his cane against the floor. Like he and Mama were old friends, just catchin up. Mama leaned over on the couch and clutched the armrest of Daddy's big chair. When I walked in, she just blinked at me.

"I haven't met your grandbabies," he said to Mama. He didn't know a lotta grandbabies round here. He fled over forty years ago on account of all them murders. Old Dutch looked me over and smiled, and then came another belly laugh. The giant bubble of his stomach jiggled against his knees.

"Malik?" Mama said.

"Nice to meet you," I said, and we shook. The bag of white bread loafs swung at my side. I thought he'd be slimy, but his hand was dry. His skin chafed mine.

"You got another grandson? Heard a little somethin about 'im."

"Yeah," Mama said. She didn't afford herself to smile. Lois's boy." Lois, the better daughter--the one who died tragic. Didn't run off and leave her kid behind like mine did. "He don't live here no more."

"That's a shame. You know my son keeps me up-to-date on a lot of goings on. Unh huh." Dutch slapped on a brown felt hat with a thin slate feather. "It's been nice re-acquaintin with you. I'll see y'all later tonight."

"Why didn't you tell me he was comin?" I followed her to the kitchen, talked to her back.

She fiddled through the drawer by the stove and pulled out a couple of knives and tossed them on the counter.

"Mama--"

"I'm already behind."

"Why was he here?"

"Get me the beef and them Vidalias off the top of the refrigerator."

I massaged the tips of my eyes with my shirt collar. Onion vapors were almost as bad as the cigar and cigarette smoke that would be invadin the house in a couple hours. Mama's wrists clicked as she chopped, the knife bangin the board. Over the last few summers, Old Dutch came to see his son, and everybody forgot he actually had one til the son came back to Nashville at the time Dutch's visits started. But Dutch was never so public, wouldn't never come to see Mama or spend a night gamblin if he didn't want everybody wary of some agenda.

I ran the tap and splashed some water on my eyes. The tears stung til I could barely hold my eyes open.

"Mama--"

She peppered the beef and added garlic powder for the \$1 hamburgers.

"Voodoo's been practiced hundreds, thousands of years? This fool just made some shit up to mess with people."

Mama slammed her palm into a beef patty. She glared at me. "You the fool here, Malik. Why you think he asked about CF?"

"Lots of people ask about CF."

Mama turned her back and shook her head. "CF's alive. Dutch wouldna said nothin if he knew he couldn't hurt 'im."

I didn't take the man's reputation lightly. Not at all. Growin up, I heard about the Juju Hoodoo Man. How he dropped almost a bar full of people dead when he found out they laughed behind his back and didn't tell him about his wife's affair with a more handsome, popular cat. But older folks loved to fear him too much, and if their kids and grandkids didn't tremble at the memory of what he done or *might have* done, we didn't have no respect. Old Dutch wasn't no true voodoo man. He didn't worship African gods or know how to woo people's minds and emotions with herbs and potions made of animal parts. I didn't care how he killed all those people. I knew he did it--maybe not how everybody said. And back then, no white cops would bother with dead niggas all over the floor of Staley's. So, the truth never came out.

"Mama, please don't let him take you on some mind trip." I knew how'd she be. All night now, she'd worry. Wonder where CF really was, even after a year-and-a-half, even after nobody on campus or the Florida police could figure what happened. "Mama, if you know what he's doin, you don't have to play along."

Mama stabbed at the onion til I feared she'd chop off her hand.

Saturday night brought its regulars for poker and spades. Mr. Ritchie, Mr. Lewis, Mr. Winters. Daddy's and Mama's friends from high school, from around the neighborhood. To partner up, they brought their nieces and nephews or sons or the latest girlfriend they tried to impress. Then there were the cats we'd see every other week, once a month, any time they could borrow the cash. Regulars or broke-ass fools, they all knew Dutch. When I took their money as they came through the back, maybe I shoulda told them he was comin. Dutch was maybe ten years older than most of them, but that didn't mean some of them couldn't have been teenagers when it all went down. Some of them coulda been there, though nobody was dumb enough to say whether they got out alive. Me and my friends had our suspicions. It was a favorite guessin game while growin up. Mr. Winters had this constant trickle down his throat. He massaged his chest and struggled to cough but never brought anything up. He turned down advice and suggestions of who to go see to fix it. Mr. Winters said it was one of them things he'd have to live with. Strokes got blamed on Dutch. Retarded grandchildren got blamed on Dutch, even when he'd been gone for years. So when he came into the living room from the kitchen, limp in lopsided with the guitar on his back and puttin all his weight on the right knee, Mama's guests didn't move. Didn't speak. They stared at the man in the brown suit, wonderin if that could possibly be the real thing, or if the fear they always carried for him brought up this phantom.

"It's good to see all y'all, mmm hmmm!" A kind ol' grandfather with a big grin. He laughed and exposed that string of phlegm hangin from the roof of his mouth, unaware of how overdressed he was in that brown suit and felt Fedora, but blissfully aware of the respect fillin the room.

Mama ran down the hallway. "So good to see you! So glad you could make it!" She patted Old Dutch on both shoulders. All of her guests greeted him then, asked him how he'd been. Daddy took the guitar off Dutch's back and set up the amp. We were mostly quiet again while he plugged it up. Nobody wanted to hear the blues man sing.

An hour-and-a-half later, I opened the back door for a white boy in a black Fedora, hard pressed red shirt with starched cuffs and collar, and black slacks with sharp creases. He tipped his hat, and perched the Fedora sideways back on his wavy, dirty-blond head.

Among the spectators at the poker table in the breakfast room, Dutch stood up and laughed. "Hey, now!

There's my boy!"

The white boy grinned. Hands in pockets, he brushed past me and entered a room full of bewildered old black men. His walk was smooth, real smooth, an aggressive stroll with long strides for someone with legs that short. Dutch clapped him on the back. He leaned in, hands still in pockets, and let Dutch give him a hug. The men around the table piled their hands in neat little stacks in front of them, took a moment to draw from cigarettes and cigars. Daddy'd been observin the spades game in the den, but someone in the hall musta told him bout Dutch's friend. Daddy looked over his shoulder on his way past the breakfast room. He got a six pack out of the refrigerator and stared at me. Then he cocked his head towards the hallway and went back to the den. He wouldn't dare keep watch himself. He was more afraid of the old blues man than Mama.

"Started to wonder if you were gon make it," he said to the white boy. "This here's Young Dutch."

It's like nobody really heard what the blues man said. They finally relied on their baser manners and gave the white boy lukewarm hellos, but I know we were all thinkin what in the hell we were gonna do with Another Damn Dutch.

He grinned just as crooked as the hat on his head and looked intently with brown eyes like filmy mud. "Nice to meet you all, too." He was definitely from around here, but he punched all the syllables. At least he didn't have that whigger speech. It was difficult to tell his speed--part metrosexy, part old-school gangsta, or both. Young Dutch gave a short bow, and the silver wallet chain tapped his side.

Mr. Lewis and Mr. Ritchie shoulda been more focused on their poker game, but they kept peekin at me over their cards to make sure I kept watch. I sat with both Dutches in the cramped breakfast room, Young white Dutch in the middle. He played with his fingernails. They were manicured and pink, with the cuticles pushed down and the milky moons exposed.

"Why don't we have some music while we wait our turn?" Old Dutch said.

"You got something new?" white Dutch said.

"Whatever I feel, young fella."

I followed them into the living room, and everybody waitin up front pretended to be delighted when Old Dutch sat on the edge of the sofa and strapped on that guitar. Young Dutch stuck his nose to the glass of the china cabinet full of Mama's plates from a Caribbean trip in the 70s. He commented on each one--Aruba, Martinique, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Curacao--and analyzed the brushwork of the art next to the china cabinet, paintings of stone streets and solid black figures shakin maracas. I grunted some response. I sympathized with the four men trapped in the living room with their girlfriends. They knew they had to stay right here, and me with them.

"What are your interests, Malik?" the white boy said.

"Not men, if you're wonderin."

He smiled but didn't look at me. "I thought it might be numbers, since you take care of the money."

"Numbers are cool, I guess."

"So you're an accountant? That's your job?"

I looked back at him and sucked my teeth. "Ain't got no job. Accountant wouldn't fly round my circles." I couldn't honestly say I wanted to be with my boys at the moment. I could choose this or sippin beers all night down the street. I wouldn't have to put up with these strange cats all night like I

would my friends, but I could busy myself here with Mama's books once we kicked everybody out. Not even Mama'd bother me then.

"I know that girl who lives across the street from you, near the corner?"

Old Dutch took song requests.

"We were in the same class and ran with the same people," Young Dutch said. CF's age then, but he didn't look it, the little elf in dress-up clothes. "I'm going to see her next weekend. We're having a little get-together. See how everyone's doing in college--"

"Yeah?" I said. I crossed my arms and stared at his patent-leather black shoes.

"Sorry, I thought you were interested in her. I know she was close to your cousin. Have you heard from him? I can let her know when I see her."

I arched my spine. Old Dutch started tunin. "How do you know Dutch exactly?"

"I found something of his."

"And he was so grateful, he let you take that nickname?"

"We're really both Dutch. Happy coincidence."

"So you and Dutch run together, hunh? He's a different breed of cat."

"He certainly is that."

"So, where do you come from...*Dutch*?" The smoke in the house burnt the surface of my skin. I slipped my hand under the collar and scratched hard. My eyes started to water.

"I live on the other side of the creek."

The white side, in a decade-old subdivision that was already rundown. It wasn't as bad as the projects a few blocks over, but those houses were cardboard cutouts. Our neighborhood was old, but the homes were sturdy and had character, their own personality. Mostly, white yuppies were movin in when old blacks died, and the folks in that subdivision across the creek only wished they could afford to live on our side. This cat wasn't anything more than new-fangled white trash. I rubbed my mouth and smirked underneath.

"Look here, Dutch, your friend, the girl across the street? I've known her almost her whole life, and she's never been interested in me, and she never will be. So, whatever you and Dutch are up to, you can leave her out."

He smiled at me, and a warmth snaked along the places I'd scratched.

"I don't know what you *think* you know about Old Dutch, but they're just myths."

Dutch snickered. "What do you think I want from him?"

"Well, it's a little odd--"

"He's a good friend. We're a lot alike. I've learned a lot from him."

"Like I said, *Dutch*, what you think happened didn't happen like that. He might teach you a lot of shit, but it's no true experience."

With each note, Old Dutch's chapped fingers slid down the guitar neck, and the silver strings sparked tiny shrieks. Maybe he played to make these chumps lose money to him. Maybe he played to charm

their women. Whatever they thought, they tapped their feet--not too enthusiastically--or closed their eyes as they swayed, drunk in his blues. Young Dutch hunched over him on the armrest. He watched Old Dutch's face with a big grin. Old Dutch didn't add words. He just hummed. There's somethin to an old man's hums. Never bitter or happy, they made me feel what coulda been, what shoulda been if luck had been a touch more kind. But they weren't for self-pity, neither. Life was good enough, their hums said, even if at the end of the road, they never really got what they wanted.

Dutch's hands slid like water over the strings. Cascaded down. Rose up. His fingers picked, calloused fingers, ticklin the strings like teasin a woman's spine. The smoke from Mr. Lyman and Bug's cigars obeyed the notes. In the soft, yellow lamplight, two blue-white strings hung in the air and burst and plumed in knotted halos. The light in the room turned to dust. Dirty, swarmin, yellow gnat wings whirled before Old Dutch's face. The old man himself lost the deep wrinkles in his cheeks. The boulder of his gut evaporated til he sat lean 'n healthy in front of me. The doody-brown jacket and pants slimmed into a shiny, navy blue suit under stage lights. Dutch played the same guitar on a makeshift stage, sweated under a black Fedora trimmed with white.

The air a mix of tobacco smoke, wine, and beer, the scent fumbled my balance. I reeled forward. My head swung down. My feet turned in, sufferin under my own weight. I forced myself forward, and my legs fought me and dragged under the weight of this new song. Muddled words, but Dutch made me understand. Sadness, bitterness, deep sorrow, but also great joy in revenge. Music mixed in dirty light. It was heavy and tangled my muscles. My right leg twisted in til I thought my hip would snap. Dutch sat on that makeshift stage, a man within a blue-black flame, untouched, unburned, his body a vapor encased in fire. I couldn't even choke for breath. I looked for the door, knowin the only thing that could save me was gettin out from under Dutch's song. Bodies slumped over the bar. Beer ran down pine and puddled on the floor in dust and shattered glass. Women lay dead on top of men. Men lay dead on top of women. On the floor. At their tables. Those who couldn't get free through death twitched and screamed. I tripped over a woman starin up with bulged eyes and wide mouth, in awe of God or the Devil, whomever came to get her. Her pelvis jerked towards the ceiling, electrocuted by Dutch's song. I fell. Crawled. Inhaled sawdust. My face grazed the floorboards. I gasped. Oxygen wouldn't go down my throat. My lungs throbbed, and a slow fire climbed down my abdomen and into my groin. My body bucked against the floor. My lips spread wide. The hinges of my jaw slowly cracked apart.

"Malik!"

I blinked and breathed in grass and healthy summer dirt. Arms wobbled a bit, but I pushed myself up on my knees.

"What's the matter?" Mama yelled from the porch. My shoulders slumped, and my neck bowed under my head's weight. I stared at the front yard across the street.

Young Dutch bent down beside me. He poked in my mouth with the tip of his index finger. A manicured nail rammed over my teeth, and his cologne bittered my saliva. He fished out a wood chip and wiped it across my bottom lip. It hung there wet.

"You're right," he said. "Knowledge's got nothing on experience....Would you happen to know who got away that night?"

#

I stared at the TV above Young Dutch's head. Bug poured our wings in the fryer. Skins bubbled in fat.

"You gonna smoke?"

"Why do you think I smoke?" he said.

I shrugged. "*Old Dutch smokes.*"

"Everybody smokes, man. I do whatever the hell I want. I'm not his bitch."

"You can leave my grandmother alone now, okay? Nobody came to her house that night. She didn't hide nobody. Her father didn't hide nobody. My family didn't get in Dutch's business."

"Are you sure about that?"

"I asked her. She swears. She thinks Dutch is gonna hurt CF. If she knew anybody who got out alive, she'd tell."

Young Dutch nodded. "I used to think CF was a little bitch. Now I get him. I *respect* him....I met him once."

I coughed up a laugh, looked at the table, and shook my head. "That's bullshit man. Quit fuckin with my grandma."

"No, for real. He crashed an overnight we had at this retreat out in Gallatin. His girlfriend came. Blond girl? Well, ex-girlfriend by then. She followed him to try to get him back. He came to talk to your faux girlfriend. CF and her always stayed close, didn't they?"

"I guess. It's good he never got caught with none of them private-school poetry textbooks she kept feedin him. He woulda gotten more punked out if my boys ever caught him with that shit. Not like you would understand that."

"Don't give me that bullshit," he said. "I know exactly what that's like. I had family wanna beat the shit out of me because I went to private school. Shit, if I got treated like your boys and *you* did CF, I would have run and never come back too. I think CF's just fine. I think he's living exactly how he wants. It's guys like you who piss me off."

CF made his way back to the dorm. I watched him from the trees off the pathway between the dorms and quad. A humid Florida night, swamp mist settled in a net of clouds from ground to sky. Grey light covered him, but I still saw him clear, even from the back, that same lanky-legged boy I'd last seen when he left for college. Shoulders hadn't broadened or body filled out. He wasn't payin attention. He thought he was safe, not like when he was back home--lookin out for boys in the neighborhood who jumped him once he turned the corner. Not like how he snuck his girl upstairs late at night.

I went right up to him and squeezed my left forearm to his neck and covered his mouth and nose with my right palm. When he saw my face, he didn't fight. I dragged him back into the trees. I kned his sternum and held him down. CF was resigned. His eyelids drooped. His tongue searched behind his mouth, poked his lips out, but he never said nuthin. When I was five or six, I wanted to know what this felt like, to choke. I tested it on myself, strangled my neck with both hands and wondered if I could go too far. My throat got sore under the tension. It took longer than I thought. I swallowed, and my windpipe strained. It hurt, but it wasn't so bad, so I squeezed a little tighter. My body fought to breathe. I couldn't stand it no more--my windpipe pinched narrow. I dropped my arms.

I wasn't stoppin now. My hands around CF's neck, I pressed in harder, crushed down. I knew he was waitin, waitin to see how much strain his throat could take. His body hadn't given out yet. I put all of my weight onto his sternum. Now he struggled, and I'd make sure he wouldn't get up again.

"What do you care if anything happens to CF?" Dutch said. Over his head, the Cards and Reds were playin on TV. Bug had brought us a basket of honey BBQ wings. "You helped run him off, asshole."

Your grandmother'd kill you if she knew what you really did to him."

My hands throbbed. Fingers ached where I choked him, pressed down through CF's Adam's apple and his windpipe and his spine. I yanked my hands under the table. This was not a memory. This didn't even happen. I never saw my cousin after he left for college. The last thing I heard, the last thing I knew, he promised to come home Christmas after that first semester ended. But I knew I did it, too. Knew how good it felt to beat that buttery skin one last time.

"I don't know what you wanna do," I said. I didn't want him to know what I'd seen, but he already knew. "I done told you Mama didn't do nuthin to disrespect your friend."

#

Mama alone, still in church clothes, ate an apple in the living room. She cut with a paring knife and slurped the uneven slices off the blade. Feet propped up on the coffee table, she stared into the china cabinet. I opened the drapes and fell back in Daddy's big chair. Mama glanced at me for just a second. She gave me a piece of apple. Then she went back to starin through the china cabinet.

"Where you been?"

"A walk."

"You get them lotto picks?"

"No. I wanted to talk to you before I made the rounds....Mama, you can't worry about CF. You can't listen to either of them damn Dutches. You know better than me how they are."

She shook her head, frownin. "Always talkin shit when you don't understand....Why don't he come home? Why won't he come see me? It was easier when I thought he passed on, but why is he stayin away on purpose? Is he hurt? Is he sick? This is so bad of me--forgive me, Jesus--but I hope he's somewhere where he don't remember who he is. I'd rather take that than know that boy abandoned me."

I couldn't tell her he was alive, and I couldn't say he was dead. Neither answer was the right one. "He, he wasn't happy." Maybe I wanted to help cause I really couldn't stand it when she was like this, or maybe I didn't want her to know what I'd really do to CF if I had the chance. I couldn't be sure.

She threw the knife against the table. It skidded across the glass and landed on the carpet. "Wasn't no reason for him to be unhappy. He could do anything, smart as he was. Get anything he wanted. Only reason he wasn't happy cause *your* dumb ass wouldn't leave him alone. You shoulda protected him!" She poked my temple with her index finger, and my neck snapped back.

I almost slapped her hand. I was grown now, and she liked to forget it. Respect her or not, her grandson or not, she needed to know I would never let her touch me that way again. But she was sobbin when I turned around. She leaned forward, and her head almost hit the coffee table. Her eyes clenched shut as far as they could go. Tears slipped through the grains of the wood.

A wail grew behind her closed lips, and it thundered to a scream. She never opened her mouth. The cracked veins in her forehead, the stringy tendons in her neck--I watched them pulse and quake, and she started drawin it out of me. My cousin was a little bitch. I knew he'd never be more than that, but listenin to Mama....I bowed my head and scratched the back of my neck. I covered my face with my T-shirt collar and rocked myself in Daddy's chair.

#

Still couldn't find my asshole. So I was at Dutch's son's Sunday afternoon, after I'd told myself three

years ago I'd never step in that house again. Old Dutch sat on a recliner on the back porch in a cigarette-stained undershirt with the guitar in his lap. Young Dutch sat next to him on a milk crate singin with eyes closed and head raised. Dutch's son watched them from a beat-up paisley couch.

*I shoul da traded ya in
when I had the chance.*

*Fore I found myself
in this circumstance.*

"What ya got?" Old Dutch said.

Young Dutch answered:

*I gotta pocket full of rocks,
too much absinthe screwin my head,*

"C'mon!" Old Dutch said.

*a trail of might have beens,
and a cold...damn...bed.*

Old Dutch laughed and swung up the neck of his guitar as he made her wail.

*I shoul da traded ya in
when I had the chance.*

I gambled my happiness--

"Hello?"

Old Dutch and Young Dutch--I interrupted their song, cut off the white-boy blues and the scratch in his voice when he ended a phrase. Young Dutch stood to greet me, but he didn't offer to shake my hand. He kept his hands in his pockets, and the wallet chain swung at his side. He smiled all bright-eyed, lookin more like a little boy than usual in that backwards baseball cap, of all things.

"Sir," I said to the old man, "please believe me. My Mama didn't help nobody from Staley's when it went down. She don't know nobody who got away." I was there for myself as much as for her, not really sure what the old man had done to me, not really sure what more he was plannin to do. But I wanted these memories bottled up tight.

"Yeah," Dutch said, "we settled all that last night. You lucky to be livin with that good, honest woman. Mmm hmmm."

I looked to Young Dutch. I wouldn't give him the anger I knew shoul da been there. Then I looked to the son for help, for anything. Behind that unpicked afro hangin over his forehead and bushy moustache, he sucked his teeth, ready for me to leave, but the white cat's grin just grew bigger and turned sideways. It spread til his lips parted and his mouth sparked some teeth. I could feel them comin, and I couldn't take a step back and leave before Young Dutch pulled somethin else out of me--a memory of what never was or what I'd wished and never gotten. But this time the memory was real. Me punchin CF black and blue for his poetry scribbled on Post-its and his good grades and his soft face. Mama askin us what happened and neither one of us fessin up. Her givin him big hugs when he came home every day and yellin at me cause I was happy bein nuthin. I just prayed this little shit would let me go

and leave me in peace.

"There's two kinds of miserable," the white boy said. "Miserable because you are who you are, and you don't hide it. Then there's the other miserable, where all you can do is hide who you are because life would be too unpredictable, too scary if you didn't." He fiddled with the chain at his side. The muddy film on his eyes froze over. "You tell your mama she doesn't have to worry about CF."

"Go on back to your grandmama now. I'm sure she's worried with you over here with me." Old Dutch laughed and coughed.

I sniffed hard, pulled snot down into my mouth and spit. I nodded at Old Dutch, then the white boy. Young Dutch smiled.

Mama was asleep on the couch in the living room when I got home, legs propped up in front of her. The paring knife had fallen to the floor, and the apple core rested in a coaster on the coffee table. Once the football games were over and they got bored, my friends would probably come for me, wanna sip beer for a couple hours til a better idea came along. I decided to find a decent enough reason to stay home. I shuffled through the stacks on Mama's desk in the den and found the books and went back to my room. I recalculated all the numbers from last night, erased tallies and filled them back in the grids. It was better than figurin what else I was gonna do.

Blue Hawk, Red Heart by Usiku

"Blue Hawk, Red Heart" first appeared in Eloquent Rhythm & Renaissance, a collection of poetry, prose, and short stories.

Being consumed by a gradual avalanche is extended death. Everything collects on the floor of the valley the way pain and confusion come together in the blues. Coal dust darkens both sides of the picture window. Heat burns oxygen into brittle pieces as I inhale, turning my lungs into parchment. Though tired, I'm too scared to stop running in place 'cause I may never move again.

The walls are also in constant motion. Maple, Chestnut, Birch, Pine and Spruce gently gather me beneath layers of foliage. The course up the mountainside is uneven and strewn with brush, vines and trees returning to dust. With each step, distractions fall into places my feet once occupied. The tangle loosens its grasp. A clearing appears. It is filled with pure grass and sprinkled with seedlings. A large gray rock in the center fills the only bare spot.

Unfiltered light caresses my bare skin; I begin sinking into the thick, green cushion. The last bit of tension slips away as my eyelids unwind. For the first time, I notice the unusual quietness. There are no birds holding conversations, no chipmunks rushing about, no wind brushing by and no bugs doing what they do best - even ants are absent. Silence stills me. I drift on sifted sands that were once quickening thoughts while the day moves on without me.

Slowly, and then all at once, the way shadows appear, I resurface. I tremble beneath a hovering shade though it covers me like a blanket. Instinctively I turn towards the rock. Something stirs, my vision clears and the looming giant becomes a hawk.

I am consumed in the light of a captivating eye filled with the expressions of beautiful people. It considers me while blinking in slow motion. This creature also came to rest. Weariness has wrapped

itself so tightly, it barely moves; however, as its sideways stare digs into my bones, the stiffness softens. A nodding head, a beak curving upward and water falling from a winking eye indicate understanding. I exhale. Confusing fear and painful talons release their hungry hold.

My lungs expand; the hawk stretches. As its huge wings unfold, the undersides of its feathers reveal another unusual feature. Light, dark, royal, sky and sea blue pigments seem hand-mixed and individually applied. Blue-gray specks skim the surface. One feather sparkles.

Fascination draws me closer and closer. The hawk welcomes me by standing and fully extending its wings. They nearly fill the clearing. I move backwards, taking several steps at once. My feet become entangled and I fall, slowly, and then all at once. In one seamless motion, I regain my footing; but the hawk has vanished, like an unspoken dream.

Sunbeams begin to erase the chill, one bump at a time. Tongues of nature speak in excited tones while insects buzz wildly to their cadence. Flowering plants display broad smiles. Fragrances linger on breezes like fresh memories.

Everything is coming together.

Night Vaulting by Camille Alexa

"Night Vaulting" first appeared in the 2007 anthology Sporty Spec: Games of the Fantastic. This story is a Washington Small Press Award nominee for best short fiction in small press publications in 2007.

In my dreams, I flew.

I'd never pole vaulted in waking life. But for the past thirty-two months, three weeks and two days, in dreams I vaulted over pit and crowd and sky at the end of a pole. At night, the slender stalk of aluminum and fiberglass in my chalky grip planted itself--an extension of my spine and lungs and the muscles of my arms -- in the ground and shot me through the air, and I flew. Beneath, the garish motley of spectators in over-bright tee-shirts undulated. All sound ceased except the pumping of my heart. The zenith moment was not brief, but elastic, sustained. My body hung suspended, in absolute success and physical perfectitude, without weight.

And then I would twist and fall. When my back slammed into the mat I would wake, gasping with the impact; crying, struggling upright, sucking breaths between sobs.

John would quiet my flailings, my beating heart, my despair. Often, neither of us could return to sleep. He'd lift me into my chair and wheel me to the kitchen. He'd make coffee, and dawn would creep across the sky, apologetic.

When John assured himself I was fine, he would wheel my chair into the den, where I spent mornings reading while he took his own wheels -- the beautiful Italian bicycle he loved as much as he loved me -- and they would ride the fresh morning trails together amid the dewdrops and the opening petals of wildflowers. That was their romance: dew and flowers and unfettered sunshine.

At dinner John served salad, then poured me another glass of wine.

His bicycle leaned against the dining room wall. He claimed it was easier to wheel it here, through the sliding-glass patio doors, than take it all the way around to the garage. Sometimes he forgot to put it away and at night, when I wasn't sailing through the sky at the end of a pole, I could hear the bicycle all

the way from my bedroom.

"You all right, Catherine?" asked John. "The anniversary's coming up, but it's been nearly three years. I'd hoped...."

"Thirty-two months, three weeks and three days," I said.

He reached across the table and placed his hand over mine. "It was nobody's fault," he said. "Just an accident. A stupid, horrible accident."

I looked at the crumpled napkin in my lap, corners sticking out like the wings of broken doves. "I didn't mention fault," I said.

John hadn't driven in thirty-two months, three weeks and three days. Nothing, since the crash, but the bicycle. I turned my head to watch it lean against the wall. My chair looked stocky and reliable next to the Italian's streamlined curves.

After dinner, John wheeled me to bed. He helped me undress and laid the sheets across my body; across the thick dead logs of my legs. He and the Italian went for an evening ride; "Just a turn about the field," he said.

They left by the dining room patio door. Even from the bedroom, I heard the click of the latch. My chair sat by the window, motionless, staring in the direction of my departing husband and his wheels.

That night I woke gasping for breath into darkness, clutching my breast with the hand which moments before had gripped the slender tower of fiberglass and vaulted me high above the bar like a rocket, like a shot, like a meteorite.

My breathing calmed. The beats of my heart resumed their ordinary rhythm. The scent of freedom and success faded from my nostrils and I lay quiet.

I saw the outline of John's body in the dark. He faced away, his breathing unhurried. The window, where my chair usually waited, was vacant.

I closed my eyes and listened. I could hear my chair in the dining room by the sliding patio doors, its rubber wheels pressed against the glass.

Without waking John I rolled myself onto the floor. I'd felt nothing below the waist for nearly thirty-two months, three weeks and four days. If there were going to be bruises, they wouldn't pain me. If bits of floor dragged and scraped my thighs where my nightgown rode up, I might bleed but unless I looked, I wouldn't know.

My palms were tingly and raw by the time I reached the dining room. My shoulders ached. By moonlight filtering in the patio doors I saw the spokes of my wheels and those of the Italian, glinting, side by side.

The last few feet were the hardest. It took me a moment to catch my breath, but the wheels were patient, and silent.

I fumbled open the lock on the sliding door, pressed both palms against the glass, and thrust it as wide as I could. My chair bounced back from the rough motion. The Italian shuddered, but didn't fall.

The screen was light, and easy to slide aside. The wheels trembled on the edge of the threshold, then the Italian shot past and sped to the edge of the yard, where it hesitated. My chair, heavy and safe, waited.

"Go," I said. "It's all right, really."

The chair bumped over the aluminum threshold and rolled across the night-soaked grasses and curled-up leaves of clover to stand beside the Italian. They then wheeled as one, veered away, and I soon lost sight of them in the tall growth of the field behind the house.

Rather than drag myself back to bed, I slept slumped against the wall. This time, when the pole cracked the whip of itself and vaulted me above the crowd, I flew higher than ever.

I spread my arms. My body soared over countryside and the sprinklings of cities. Flattened against invisible currents, I watched anonymous landscape pass below; patchwork cornfields and the mottled greens of forest. On the edge of the horizon near the rising sun I caught the twinkle of spokes, spinning across the earth as I shot, unapologetic, across the sky.

Fall of Snow by F. J. Bergmann

With written permission, "Fall of Snow" includes an excerpt from Marion Boyer's poem "Her Favorite Story". This poem was published by [Folio](#) and also appears in the chapbook poetry collection [Green](#)

It is hard to tell you of snow. It was like the ash, but colder.

Marion Boyer, "Her Favorite Story"

I am helping Mamá pack for the move north. The deepest wells have run dry, as have our tears. I cannot imagine that there will ever be snow again, no matter how far north we travel.

The man who made the snow lived up on the hill, in a house that was white, all white: walls, roof, doors, cornices, pillars. Behind the screened and barred windows we could see white curtains swaying slowly in the breeze from an invisible fan. A white cement wall surrounded the estate, topped with icy shards of glass. The iron gate was painted white, too, and rarely unlocked. It opened only for parties, when the colonels of the *junta* would emerge from dark, armored limousines with an entourage of thugs and celebrated tango dancers, and to let out the snow-making machine, with its driver-operator and two guards armed with submachine guns.

When people died there was no snow, only ashes on the wind. As the seasonal heat waves and epidemics reached their red zenith and the sick and old drifted into death like the schools of small river fish, the ash from the crematorium fell in warm, thick flakes, to settle in drifts like a terrible parody of a blizzard. But for birthdays and other celebrations, those who could afford it--and many who could not (Sr. *Hombre-de-nieve* offered easy credit terms) -- paid for a snowfall, their shanty roofs and pathetic gardens briefly transformed to glittering jewel-boxes of *diamantes y perlas*, shrieking children twirling in veils of crystalline powder like rotating plastic figurines on an expanse of frosted cake, their sallow cheeks pinkening in the prickle of ice.

This year the cooler season never came to Oregon, nor its brief rains. Even high in the mountains, the air recoiled squirming from the blazing rocks. The rivers receded into glistening mud and then crackled like dry snakeskin. There had never been so many deaths. Ash motes in their millions hung in the sweltering air like a fog of midges. School started earlier and earlier before sunrise and let out sooner, in a vain attempt to evade the heat. Our classes were held in the humid school basement, but it did no good, and teachers and students fainted daily. The water-pumping company increased its rates monthly instead of quarterly, and the snow became more and more expensive, even though the machine used

water from the few remaining deep-lake bottoms and sinkholes to avoid the charges. The Snow Merchant began requiring payment weeks in advance, but it was my *quinceañera* and Papá had promised snow for my party.

For days before, there was a constant barrage of envious questions from the other girls in my class, whispering in the hot dark on the way to school: *Do you think it will be as deep as it was at María's house? Remember when Rosa's father had it colored pink? My father said it was too expensive and I'd have to share a party with my cousins! Don't you think that's awful?*

On the afternoon of my party, I was too impatient to worry about our house's shabbiness, too excited to be bothered by the sweat trickling to wilt the crisp lace of my new dress--in a few hours everything would be eclipsed in white, vanish under the beautiful snow. I made a sign to put above the door: *WELCOME TO WINTER!*

When my friends and their parents began to arrive, the snow machine was already an hour late. No frost concealed our grubby yard, no icicles hung from peeling paint and shingles. Our guests milled uncomfortably in the sparsely-furnished living room, holding tiny glasses of syrup-like punch and lurid, dyed cookies. The girls murmured in sympathy as I greeted them but their parents and brothers stared scornfully at our worn-out rugs and furniture. I was just beginning to feel the first tears creep up behind my eyes when we heard the rumble of the snow machine's spiked treads.

Papá marched out to confront the driver, who waved his arms and expostulated--he had done the best he could, he insisted: to find a pool deep enough from which to draw the water had required going further than ever before; there had been difficulties... "We can leave, if you don't want it," one of the guards finally said, gruffly, "but he's not giving refunds, not now." Papá finally grumbled at them to begin, but I heard him say to Mamá that he would have something to say to "Mr. Snow Man" about goodwill, and cheating those who worked hard for their money.

He was even more vocal when the machine began to do its work. Not the white crystals, each flake a faceted star, that had filled our neighbors' yards in the past, but a spray of rapidly-melting greenish lumps began to coat our house, the terrace, the few spindly bushes and desiccated trees with a spurious mockery of verdant foliage. Opaque slush splattered my new dress, dribbling from the limp fabric with a putrid odor of algae and rotting fish. The machine's roar suddenly escalated in volume until it reached a hideous crescendo in a screech of torquing metal, then stopped. There was a horrified silence, filled only with the steady drip of clots of green slime from each twig and lintel.

Then they all began shouting at once, until there was a pandemonium of shrieking girls, infuriated parents, and over it all, my father bellowing "Filth! Scum! How dare you insult us so! You'll clean my yard with your tongues before I'm through with you!" The mothers whose daughters' birthdays were approaching huddled to murmur among themselves in consternation. The operator frantically tried to restart the snow-maker, but produced only a few bangs and sparks, and a smell of burning insulation. The guards raised their guns threateningly as the truck's engine sputtered and it rolled slowly away down the dusty street.

The guests trickled out disconsolately, with eloquent expressions of pity as they passed my parents. No one hugged me, in my soaked, ruined dress. I looked up for the stars Papá said used to be there, where the Northern *blancos* had gone, from their high-latitude fortresses, in the space-built vessels, but there was only the permanent flat, low ceiling of hot clouds that refused to bring rain.

A week later, Papá went from door to door, gathering a group of men. I had crept out to follow Papá and saw how they persuaded themselves that they could take a stand, make a difference in the world.

The fathers who had paid for snow in advance that would, it now appeared, never be delivered, were the most determined. After much discussion--my father spoke earnestly against violence, and made impassioned speeches about "neighborliness" and "bonds of trust" -- they marched up to the Snow Merchant's mansion, shouting "Down with cheats!" and "Justice!" and demanding the return of their money. No guard stood by the locked iron gates, and the house was dark. With rocks and crowbars, the mob was able to pry the gates open. As they began to surge hesitantly up the white gravel driveway, which glistened in the moonlight like a wasteland of ice, they heard the rumble of the snow machine's engine starting. It came around the side of the house, gathering speed as it swerved onto the drive, the guards hanging on the outside clutching their guns with one hand and the machine with the other.

The Snow Merchant himself was at the wheel. The rest of the men scattered, but Papá stood firm in the center of the drive with his hand raised, saying in his deep voice, "You won't get away like that. Stop, and we'll discuss what you'll do about compensation." But the Snow Merchant did not turn aside, made no attempt to brake. The machine turned onto the north road and roared away into the darkness.

My father was always a good man, an honest man, and he thought everyone could be counted upon to do the right thing, as long as they were approached in a reasonable manner. Now there is no water to spare to clean his crushed, bloodied body; no more water here.

American Indians at the Final Frontiers of Imperial Sf by Carter Meland

Images of spaceships zooming beyond final frontiers, captained by compassionate but bullheaded leaders, with phasers, lasers, and light sabers near to hand might seem light years away from the movie image of a cowboy riding the range, but they aren't really. The cherished "oaters" of American cinema, the horse operas that made John Wayne a star, cemented notions of a rugged, and masculine, American individualism as normative in American culture. Our cowboys lived at the edge of the known world, using their Winchester rifles and Colt .45s to protect tenderfooted settlers from the savage Indians that lived "out there" in the dark depths of the unknown. Indians stood between the nation and its Manifest Destiny and cowboys knew how to deal with Indians. That six-gun or that rifle was all those wily savages would ever understand.

The popularity of Westerns waned in the 1950s, but the story of American Manifest Destiny didn't. It was transposed from the frontier of the wilderness onto the frontier of space. Horse operas became space operas and the wild Apache and Comanche that John Wayne slaughtered became alien races on alien worlds that threatened our humanity, aliens like the Klingons that Captain Kirk strived to pacify in the original *Star Trek* series. Though driven by notions of the positive changes we might imagine for the future, science fiction (hereafter, sf) too often replicates this American imperial past -- that past of the white American's Manifest Destiny to cross frontiers and colonize other peoples and other homelands, to make them *ours* -- especially when it (sf) deals with Indians or issues that affect Indian peoples or Indian country. Land might be the big issue here: the dispossession of it through imperialist policy and science (that invented ways to quantify and prove Indian inferiority), but the ripple effects of imperialism on indigenous individuals and societies need also be acknowledged, not glossed over, or just accepted as an unfortunate by-product of human progress.

If any field of American popular culture should be open to imagining ways that American Indian peoples may throw off the shackles of the colonial past to help reimagine the American present and its possible futures, you would think it might be sf. The focus of sf on potential developments and the possibilities that should be available to humanity in the future makes me wonder why sf doesn't handle

American Indian issues better. I found it disappointing that the stories I wanted to read about the decolonization of the Americas, about how Indians might handle their encounters with alien races (which they've had over five hundred years experience with), and about what might have happened if Custer were kidnapped by the Lakota instead of killed at Little Bighorn were not available. I found virtually nothing like these kinds of stories and those that did approach such themes and issues were dissatisfying (for reasons I'll explain below). Where were these stories and, more importantly, where were the Indians in these stories? I didn't want cardboard clichés recycled from movies and books that were worn out even before they were written. I also didn't want to see Indians just brought into the story as racial windowdressing, as in there's a group of scientists and one happens to be Mohawk. I wanted substance from these stories, substantive engagement with American Indian characters who are Indian for a reason. And when American Indian issues are engaged, I wanted genuine reflection on it from the perspective that American Indians are living peoples (it's always peoples too; there are 562 different federally recognized American Indian nations in the United States and at least 250 others seeking recognition), living peoples with living knowledge systems that are significant ways of making meaning in the world. Why is it so hard to find these Indians in sf?

A young Ojibwe man of my acquaintance said, "Maybe the problem is that word 'science.' " While he is certainly right in many ways -- the "science fictions" of Social Darwinist phrenology and blood measurement have been, and in the case of blood quantum, are still used to question, and sometimes dispossess Native peoples of their identities and homelands -- it is also a mistake to think that sf is always really about science.

The British sf writer and critic Brian Stableford asserts that there are two broad types of sf writers, those inspired by the rationalist H.G. Wells and those inspired by the French absurdist Alfred Jarry (author of *Ubu Roi*, an inspiration to the Surrealists among others). Writers like Wells are scientific, they pose a hypothesis in their stories and pursue its implications with the rigorous discipline of their white-coated counterparts in the lab. Such "hard" sf can be found in the works of writers like Arthur C. Clarke and Stephen Baxter. Writers in the vein of the absurdist Jarry are unconcerned with the rigors of scientific discipline and aim instead to "disturb settled routines of thought" in Stableford's words. Philip K. Dick, whose novels inspired movies like *Blade Runner*, *Minority Report*, and *A Scanner Darkly*, worked such a vein of disturbance. Dick claimed that the aim of sf was to create a "shock of dysrecognition" in the reader's mind, to unsettle conventional habits of being and wake the reader's mind to new possibilities of thought, possibilities that point to entirely new perspectives on culture, history, and technology. Dick even asserted that sf writers are in the business of imagining "new societies."

So science should not be a problem for American Indians in sf. Sf is as much *speculative* fiction, as it is *science* fiction. Everyone can speculate, and I think most American Indian writers would like to see the creation of a new society, one free of racist cultural icons like the savage Indian from the Westerns and the bucktoothed grin of the Cleveland Indians' Chief Wahoo. But this racism persists, even in the boundless potentialities that sf can imagine.

Racism is present in much classic American sf by its absence. There are no races in the imagined future and so no racism. Speaking broadly and generally, Earthers in such works have had to unite to face the Bug-Eyed Monsters from Beyond and under this external threat it is our shared humanity that is important, not our ethnicity. Race will be transcended in this future, as we all pull together to whip alien ass. (Think *Independence Day*; Will Smith is no Malcolm X.) The movement from Earth to space in such sf is a means of transcending the problems of race and racism.

The bridge of the Enterprise in the original *Star Trek* television series is emblematic of this inspiring future. It has a multiethnic, multiracial, and even multispecies crew all working together. But wait! Who guides them on their five-year mission into space? A white man of course, a man made of the same stern stuff as the cowboy, the compassionate but bullheaded James T. Kirk. The "T" stands for Tiberius (one of the Roman emperors) and a "kirk" is what people in Scotland and the north of England call a church. The Scottish connection in his name also point us to the practical rational humanism of that nation's Enlightenment as part of his heritage. Captain Kirk's ethnicity and name direct us explicitly towards the leadership of whiteness and enlightenment, empire and church, and what we learn from his name, and in this movement to space, is that imperial expansion will guide us away from the problems of earthly racism.

This raises another "but wait!" moment: Isn't it imperial expansion on Earth that, in part, generates the racism that sf proposes the imperial expansion into space will solve? I mean whites couldn't enslave African peoples without imperialism and they couldn't dispossess Indian peoples without it either; likewise, the various forms of race-hatred (white of black, black of white, American Indian of white, white of American Indian, etc.) wouldn't exist without the various forms of economic exploitation and extraction that imperialism depends on. I mean, if contact between Europeans and indigenous peoples of the Americas (as well as other points on the globe) had proceeded as one group of equals meeting another group of equals, and had resulted in a series of mutually beneficial exchanges, where would racism be? I'm not such a Pollyanna as to believe everything ever was all harmony and handholding, but I'm also aware that imperialism is a historical trajectory, not a natural event. As dictated by gravity, an object dropped from the roof of my house falls toward the center of the earth, but no such natural force dictates the movement of history. Why project the author of our world's gravest injustices onto our imaginations of the future or our imaginations of new societies? Why perpetuate this story of expansion and exploitation when, despite its economic successes for some, we know it is destructive to so many more? That it, in fact, disrupts the environments we live within faster than we can evolve to accept those changes as part of our internal chemistry. (I mean, eventually, humans may find a cloud of carbon dioxide invigorating, but right now it just makes us dead.)

Much American sf expresses these utopian dreams of de-raced imperial futures. In light of the imperialist thrust of so much American sf, it is important to consider the ways in which non-Indian sf writers engage with American Indian characters and American Indian matters. In other words, how are American Indians seen through the imperial eye of sf?

While there are multiples of ways American Indian peoples are seen in sf, one prominent way they are represented is as nascent imperialists. Not surprising in a field that embraces imperialism as full of utopian potential. Two stories will help me discuss my point.

William Tenn's story "Eastward Ho!" appeared in the October 1958 issue of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* (later reprinted in 1960 in *The Best from Fantasy and Science Fiction: Ninth Series*) and Paul Melko's story "The Teosinte War" appeared in the 2006 sf anthology *Futureshocks*. Nearly fifty years separate these stories, yet both engage the fantasy of American Indians as imperialists.

Tenn's story takes place in a United States that has suffered a complete economic, technological, and military collapse after, presumably, a nuclear war. The nation has fragmented into competing political territories, most of which are controlled by American Indian tribes, and the United States itself is limited to a few states north of New Jersey. According to the story, after the war the Indian nations were "the first to adjust to the new conditions... the Indians [now] had the granaries, the Indians had the

oil lamps" (98-99). Indians have all the wealth and power that white Americans once had.

In the story, the U.S. government sends a young white man to see that the Indians honor their treaties (!) and "retire once more behind the banks of the Susquehanna River" (106). The Sioux Indians he meets with are sympathetic, but remind him that "weaker peoples always go to the wall" (107) and, in the end, inform the young white that there is no United States for him to return to -- it has been taken over by the Ojibwe, Cree, and Montagnais. As he leaves, he is informed that there remains a remnant of the U.S. Navy, near the beach in Asbury Park. Once there he boards ship and along with other refugees sails "To the fabled lands of Europe. To a place where a white man can stand at last on his own two legs. Where he need not fear persecution" (112).

It is an amusing story, and meant to be amusing -- though as it was first published in 1958 I suppose it is also cautionary for its American readers: if white Americans unleash a nuclear armageddon not only will they lose, they will lose absurdly, as the Indians will win and the whites will have to return to Europe. In the story the Indians don't take over by being Indians, they do so by being imperialists: they are more successful in their exploitation of natural resources than other races and they need to expand into white territory to feed an expanding population. They are also white imperialists because they are not real Indians. Though they wear buffalo robes and meet in wigwams, these Indians have names like Chief Three Hydrogen Bombs and Makes Much Radiation, and they learn how to be Indian from Bright Book Jacket who teaches them from salvaged volumes like Robert Lowie's *The Crow Indians*. It would be absurd enough at the height of the Cold War to lose the United States to Indians; it is even more absurd to lose it to Indians playing at being Indian. White imperialism can certainly find interesting ways to rationalize its insecurities about its genocidal past and nuclear present.

It is fairly easy to see this kind of imperial imperative imposed on Indians in a story from fifty years ago, but what happens to Indians in sf after the social and cultural leaps initiated by the civil rights movements and the cultural sensitivities they initiated? Paul Melko's 2006 story of "The Teosinte War" is instructive here.

In the story, the historian Dr. Elk hires grad student Ryan Greene to be the Teaching Assistant for his course on Native American history. Both men are identified in the story as "Native American." Though they have no specific tribal identity, they must be Indians -- as one is an Elk and the other is Greene in a not-so-subtle allusion to Native people's well-known environmentalism, or perhaps a not-so-subtle invocation of the romantic *stereotype* that Indians are instinctually "green." Other than their names and their concern with the study of pre-Columbian America, nothing makes these characters Indian other than brief mentions of their dark complexions. Nothing in their work speaks of traditions alternative to those of the West's and nothing suggests that either man even knows of such traditions. Neither man seems to have such a thing as kin, and kin in Native communities is the most important thing one can have.

Melko's story has a more sophisticated notion of American Indian history than the one *not* shown in Tenn's story. In fact, Dr. Elk's research deals with the problems of European and American colonization and the genocide of American Indian peoples. Unlike other historians, who dig through archives and write up their findings, Elk has access to a Multi-Worlds Device. The Multi-Worlds Device depends on a key idea in some branches of theoretical physics, namely that we live in a multiverse, rather than a universe. The idea in the story is that multiple universes like ours exist and that with this device one can observe these other worlds and interact with them on a limited basis. With this device, Elk intends to do an experiment with history.

His thesis is familiar to readers of Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. Germs were the source of

European "superiority" in its contact with Native America; germs from crowded living conditions that developed because of the Agricultural Revolution; germs that Europeans developed a resistance to, that Native Americans did not. Elk reasons that if indigenous Americans developed agricultural societies *at the same time* as the peoples in the Near East (instead of six millennia later), when Columbus and the other Europeans exploiters arrive the Indians will be on an equal footing with the people who would conquer them. Such a scenario would offer a fair fight.

With a gadget called a spyeye, Elk can observe this other Earth, as well as deliver a small payload of corn seed to it. His plan is to deliver the corn to a point ten thousand years in this earth's past, an historical moment coinciding the development of agriculture in Eurasia. He selects three village sites to seed, which he names Columbus, Cleveland, and Cincinnati. (While these are all cities in Ohio, home to author Melko, we cannot help but note that for an Indian like Dr. Elk to provide the honorifics of Columbus and Cleveland -- home to one of the most grossly stereotypical team mascots, the Indians -- to these two ancient villages seems unlikely; any irony in these names intended by Melko seems likely to spin in the direction of offense for readers familiar with contemporary Native issues.) Agriculture takes off in Columbus and Cleveland and eventually the Indians there develop imperial ambitions. Then the Chinese invade and quash them and this Earth goes a completely different direction than ours and Elk has to start the project on another Earth. By the year 1000 on this second experimental Earth, the Native people of New England have achieved a fully integrated agricultural economy and technologically progressive civilization (including the printing press) and then they decide to sail the seas. As the characters in the story watch, the Indians set sail and discover England. There, they trade with the locals, re-provision their ship, and invite a few English people to join them on the return journey. "Translators," Elk explains. "The first step toward understanding. This is most excellent" (218).

Upon returning to their home port in "pseudo-Boston," half the crew of the ship has died from a "poxlike" disease" and the rest show the lesions of the disease. Switching from the spyeye in pseudo-Boston to one in England, they are "shocked to see the black smoke of funeral pyres clouding the sky" (219). It would seem that plague has struck both groups. Via the spyeyes, they zoom ahead a year. Both the Americas and Europe are nearly depopulated; European "crowd diseases" have infected the Native population and Native "crowd diseases" have done the same to the European. The narrator estimates 200 million dead. Elk disappears from the university and Greene is left undertake the task of "rebuilding Dr. Elk's universe" by "helping the survivors and... making certain we do not play god again. Making certain we do not use entire universes as laboratories" (221).

It is an inventive story and addresses an issue closer to the heart of Indian country than the one Tenn addressed. Tenn's story explores the ramifications of nuclear war on society and as nuclear war effects everyone, it is more of a universal theme. Melko's story explores the morality of colonization and the consequences of contact, which we know devastated Native societies in the Americas. Melko's story is more Indian-oriented thematically: Indians have a more unique claim on concern with issues of colonization and the consequences of contact; ostensibly, it is not so universal an issue as a nuclear armageddon might be. Still, though more of an Indian issue story, it is odd how Melko addresses this issue. Ryan Greene, the narrator of the story, is Native American, but always addresses Indians as "they" or "them;" he even cynically remarks that Dr. Elk's funding for the project is "Casino money, probably" (203). I have already commented on the "ironies" in naming these Indian empires after Columbus and Cleveland. What both these elements in the story point to is not so much Ryan's and Elk's Indianness but rather their deracination. Un-raced, Ryan and Elk fit into that imagined raceless future that critics have identified as crucial to sf's imagination of itself. Ryan never takes any pride in

his ancestry or says anything about the experimental subjects on this other Earth that evinces any kind of emotional or intellectual fellow feeling. They are merely objects he observes. (Though by the story's end he has debated the morality of the directions that Elk has spurred them in and written them up as his Ph.D. thesis, Ryan does not hint that what he has learned has driven him to reconsider his relation to his heritage.)

In Tenn's story the future is raced, but in name only (as the Indians have to learn what Indian means from the works of white anthropologists), while in Melko's story the main characters are Indians who refer to themselves in the third person. The issue of contact and conquest of Native America by disease -- an historical fact of unimaginable devastation, the effects of which still live in Native communities -- is in Melko's story claimed, like nuclear armageddon, to be a universal issue, as something that affects one and all, even if the historical evidence does not support such a conclusion. The story suggests that given agriculture the Indians of North America would develop a technological, imperial economy and society, a mirror image of what was taking place in Europe, and that as a result of their development on an even footing, they might unleash the diseases that would devastate a continent. Such a plot trajectory intimates what we might consider sf's terminal dependence upon a manifest imperial destiny: everyone will always destroy others, even if that is not what they mean to do. In the light of this universal condition, the devastation that European and Euroamerican colonization unleashed on indigenous peoples is an inevitability and if on our Earth the Europeans are at fault, on other Earths the Indians are.

While it is too much to say, based on the evidence of these two stories, that sf deals with Indians in one way, I do think that the relationship of Indians to imperialism forwarded in these stories is instructive. If Indians are imperialists at heart and Europeans are imperialists at heart (and so are the Chinese who show up briefly in Melko's story), then imperialism is a universal human condition (rather than an historical social-economic trajectory) that occurs with a near Marxian predictability *in every society*. Nowhere do Tenn or Melko say these things, but their stories point in this direction and so sf sounds the bell of a universal human condition, including imperial expansion, as one of its great generic (as in genre, not as in unremarkable) themes.

The question then becomes how do Indians who have written sf engage these themes of imperial expansion and righting what has been wronged. Decolonization, undoing colonial and imperial habits of thought, especially as they relate to indigenous people, is one of the central concerns of Native writers and scholars in general. Native sf writers are no different from their peers working in other genres and I will explore the ways they address these questions of imperial thought, sf, and indigenous characters in a forthcoming essay. For the moment, suffice it to say, that sf by Native writers concerning Native characters seeks to privilege Native power, to present Native ways of seeing and being as legitimate, and to explore the differing ways of perceiving the universe we all share.

Contributor Biographies

Joe Haldeman

Born in Oklahoma 9 June 1943. Grew up in Puerto Rico, New Orleans, Washington, D. C., and Alaska. Currently live in Gainesville, Florida and Cambridge, Massachusetts with my wife Gay Haldeman (who teaches in the MIT Writing Center). As of August 2008, we have been married 43 years.

Education

B. S. in astronomy, University of Maryland, 1967. Graduate work there in math/computer science, 1969-70; no degree (dropped out to write). Went to the Iowa Writers Workshop for an M.F.A. in Creative Writing, 1975.

Teaching

Currently Adjunct Professor -- I'm teaching a science fiction writing workshop and (in alternate years) Reading and Writing Longer Fiction and Reading and Writing Genre Fiction.

Military

Drafted 1967, fought in the Central Highlands of Viet Nam as a combat engineer with the 4th Division (1/22nd Airmobile Bn.). Purple Heart and other standard medals.

Books

- [WAR YEAR](#) (short novel) Holt, 1972
- [COSMIC LAUGHTER](#) (anthology) Holt, 1974
- [THE FOREVER WAR](#) (novel) St. Martin's Press, 1975
- [MINDBRIDGE](#) (novel) St. Martin's Press, 1976
- [PLANET OF JUDGMENT](#) (Star Trek novel) Bantam, 1977
- [ALL MY SINS REMEMBERED](#) (novel) St. Martin's Press, 1977
- [STUDY WAR NO MORE](#) (anthology) St. Martin's Press, 1977
- [INFINITE DREAMS](#) (short story collection) St. Martin's Press, 1978
- [WORLD WITHOUT END](#) (Star Trek novel) Bantam, 1979
- [WORLDS](#) (novel) Viking, 1981
- [WORLDS APART](#) (novel) Viking, 1983
- [NEBULA AWARDS 17](#) (anthology) Holt, 1983
- [DEALING IN FUTURES](#) (short story collection) Viking, 1985
- [TOOL OF THE TRADE](#) (novel) Morrow, 1987
- [BUYING TIME](#) (novel) Morrow, 1989
- [THE HEMINGWAY HOAX](#) (short novel) Morrow, 1990
- [WORLDS ENOUGH AND TIME](#) (novel) Morrow, 1992
- [VIETNAM AND OTHER ALIEN WORLDS](#) (essays, fiction, poetry) NESFA Press, 1993
- [1968](#) (novel) Hodder & Stoughton, U.K., 1994, William Morrow, Inc., June 1995
- [SAUL'S DEATH](#) (poetry chapbook) Anamnesis Press, May 1997
- [FOREVER PEACE](#) (novel) Berkley, October 1997
- [FOREVER FREE](#) (novel) Ace, 1998
- [THE COMING](#) (novel) Ace, 2000
- [GUARDIAN \(novel\)](#) Ace, 2002
- [CAMOUFLAGE](#) (novel) Ace, 2004
- [OLD TWENTIETH](#) (novel) Ace, 2005
- [WAR STORIES](#) (collection, two novels and short stories) Night Shade, 2005
- [A SEPARATE WAR and other stories](#) (short story collection) Ace, 2006

- [THE ACCIDENTAL TIME MACHINE](#) (novel) Ace, 2007
- [MARSBOUND](#) (novel) Ace, 2008

Paul Levinson

Paul Levinson's *The Silk Code* won the 2000 Locus Award for Best First Novel. He has since published *Borrowed Tides* (2001), *The Consciousness Plague* (2002), *The Pixel Eye* (2003), and *The Plot To Save Socrates* (2006). His science fiction and mystery short stories have been nominated for Nebula, Hugo, Edgar, and Sturgeon Awards. His eight nonfiction books, including *The Soft Edge* (1997), *Digital McLuhan* (1999), *Realspace* (2003), and *Cellphone* (2004), have been the subject of major articles in the *New York Times*, *Wired*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and have been translated into ten languages. *New New Media* will be published in 2009.

Paul Levinson appears on "The O'Reilly Factor" (Fox News), "The CBS Evening News", the "NewsHour with Jim Lehrer" (PBS), "Nightline" (ABC), and numerous national and international TV and radio programs. He reviews the best of television in his InfiniteRegress.tv blog. Paul Levinson is Professor of Communication & Media Studies at Fordham University in New York City.

Claude Lalumière

Claude Lalumière is a Montreal writer and editor. His anthologies include Witpunk (with Marty Halpern), Island Dreams, Open Space, and Lust for Life (with Elise Moser). Claude's fiction has appeared in Year's Best SF 12, Year's Best Fantasy 6, SciFiction, Interzone, On Spec, several volumes of The Mammoth Book of Best New Erotica, and others.

His story "Different Flesh" was longlisted for the 2006 Kindred Award for speculative fiction dealing with issues of race and ethnicity. His work has been translated into French, Spanish, Polish, Russian, and Italian.

Elizabeth A. Mierzejewski

I have 4 publishing credits, three from [Toasted-Cheese.com](#). My two stories "The Ships Come Tomorrow" and "In Memory of Maggie" both won first place in the Toasted Cheese literary magazine's fall science fiction contest, in 2006 and 2007 respectively. I have also had a poem, "Ideas," published in their Best of the Boards section of the ezine. My CNF piece "Picasso's Guitar" is currently featured in Motherwise.

My story "In Memory of Maggie" is currently being produced for podcasting at [Clonepod.org](#). You can see some of my story-based and otherwise random drawings, etc. at my [website](#).

Toiya Kristen Finley

Nashville, TN native Toiya Kristen Finley is the Head Writer for Quantum Learning Technologies, creating reading materials for elementary and middle school readers. Her fiction for adults has appeared in a variety of publications, including Nature, Dog Versus Sandwich, Farrago's Wainscot, and Fifth Wednesday Journal. Upcoming work will be in Subtle Edens, Electric Velocipede and Doorways Magazine. She is the founding and former managing/fiction editor of Harpur Palate.

Usiku

Usiku (pronounced oo-SEE-koo) achieved success for ELOQUENCE: RHYTHM & RENAISSANCE, positive poetry and short stories for the person and for the planet, with a 2008 NAACP Image Award Nominee. His poem, "Eloquence", was featured in the NAACP souvenir program guide.

Usiku has received television, newspaper, magazine and online media coverage. Read more nature-inspired writing at www.usiku.net and on his blog, [Writer's Whirlpool](#).

Camille Alexa

My work has sold to ChiZine, Fantasy Magazine, Abyss&Apex, and a variety of anthologies. I'm a full member of Broad Universe, an international organization to promote women's fiction in speculative genres. I'm also a member of the Science Fiction Poetry Association and currently serve as Poetry Editor for the literary print 'zine Diet Soap. I write and review for The Green Man Review.

F.J. Bergmann

Jeannie Bergmann is a web designer and artist. She maintains madpoetry.org, a local poetry website, as well as this site, wfop.org, and others. Her poems have appeared in the Beloit Poetry Journal, Blue Fifth Review, Cannibal, Margie, the North American Review, nthposition, Real Poetik, Rosebud, Southern Poetry Review, Tattoo Highway, on asininepoetry.com (as Easter Cathay), and her Flash translation Lace was shown at the 2002 Electronic Literature Symposium. In 2003 she received the Mary Roberts Rinehart National Poetry Award and was a finalist for the James Hearst and Joy Bale Boone poetry prizes and the Violet Reed Haas book prize. In 2004 she won the Pauline Ellis Prose Poetry Prize and was the runner-up for the Stephen Dunn Award. In 2005, she received third places in The Writer magazine New Discovery contest and the Lumina Ultra-Short contest, and won Rosebud's 2006 Mary Shelley Imaginative Fiction contest. She co-edited the 2008 Wisconsin Poets' Calendar.

Carter Meland

Carter Meland has been teaching American Indian Literature courses for the Department of American Indian Studies since before the turn of the millennium. He received his Ph.D. in American Studies with a thesis that examined the role of tricksters in the works of contemporary Native novelists. His academic work has appeared in journals like American Studies, Studies in the Humanities, and Studies in American Indian Literatures. His fiction has appeared in Yellow Medicine Review and The Scruffy Dog Review. He is now at work researching Native writing in the science fiction, fantasy, and horror genres.